GLOBAL LUNG CANCER COALITION

South Africa briefing:
Symptom awareness, attitudes to lung cancer and views on screening
Findings from a global survey

Overview

The Global Lung Cancer Coalition (GLCC) is a partnership of 44 patient organisations across 32 nations / territories, working to improve lung cancer awareness, reduce stigma and improve outcomes.

The GLCC Patient Charter asserts that all people with lung cancer have the right to dignity, respect, quality care, informed decision making, privacy and freedom from blame and stigma.

Public perceptions can significantly affect these rights. Stigma and low symptom awareness may delay help-seeking and diagnosis, making it important to understand attitudes towards lung cancer.

In 2026, the GLCC conducted a global study to explore public attitudes to lung cancer, awareness of symptoms and views on screening. The research builds on studies undertaken in 2010, 2013, 2017 and 2023.

The GLCC is calling on governments and health systems across the world to:

- Increase recognition of lung cancer symptoms through targeted public awareness campaigns
- Challenge stigma and misconceptions through evidence-based awareness initiatives
- Implement national lung cancer screening programmes to support earlier detection and treatment
- Ensure equitable access to screening, diagnosis and care for all people affected by lung cancer

This briefing sets out the key findings from South Africa in 2026 and how they compare with other countries included in the survey. The results highlight three key themes:

- **Awareness of lung cancer symptoms** is among the highest of all countries included in the survey, with South Africa recording the lowest proportion of respondents unable to identify any symptom of lung cancer.
- **Levels of stigma** towards people with lung cancer remain very high, with South Africa recording one of the highest proportions of respondents reporting less sympathy for people with lung cancer than for people with other cancers.
- **Public support for lung cancer screening** is exceptionally strong, with South Africa recording the highest level of support among all countries included in the survey.

Key findings: South Africa

Symptom recognition

- Almost **two in ten** (**18.2%**) people responding to the survey said they did not know any symptoms of lung cancer, up slightly from **16.8%** in **2023** but the lowest proportion recorded across all countries included in the survey.
- Men were more likely than women to report not knowing any symptoms (**22.4% vs. 15.9%**).
- Lack of symptom awareness was highest among people **aged 18-24** (**21.5%**), and lowest among those **aged 35-44** (**16.1%**).
- People who had never smoked were more likely than those who currently smoke or had smoked previously to report not knowing any symptoms (**23.8% vs. 14.4%**).

Attitudes towards lung cancer

- More than **half** of respondents (**53.8%**) said they had less sympathy for people with lung cancer than for people with other types of cancer, up from **48.4%** in **2023** and above the **2026 global average** of **39.2%**.
- Men were more likely than women to report less sympathy for people with lung cancer than for people with other types of cancer (**58.8% vs. 51.1%**).
- Reported stigma was highest among people **aged 18-24** (**62.6%**), and lowest among those **aged 55 and over** (**29.4%**).
- People who currently smoke or had smoked previously were slightly more likely than those who had never smoked to express less sympathy towards people with lung cancer (**54.5% vs. 53.0%**).

Views on lung cancer screening

- More than **nine in ten** respondents (**93.5%**) agreed there should be a national lung cancer screening programme to help people with lung cancer get diagnosed early, down slightly from **95.3%** in **2023** but the highest level of support recorded in the survey.
- Women were more likely than men to support the need for lung cancer screening programmes (**94.8% vs. 91.2%**).
- Support was highest among people **aged 35-44** (**95.9%**), although it exceeded **90%** across **all age groups**.
- People who currently smoke or had smoked previously were slightly more supportive than those who had never smoked (**95.3% vs. 91.3%**).

Methodology

The GLCC commissioned the market research agency Censuswide to undertake an online survey of adults across 32 countries between 17 March 2026 – 24 March 2026. The survey samples included 1,000 adults from South Africa and data was weighted using age, gender and region to produce a representative sample in each country. Respondents were asked the following questions:

- Q1. There are many warning signs and symptoms of lung cancer. Please list as many symptoms of lung cancer as you can think of [a tick box was provided for 'Don't know'].
- Q2. Lung cancer is mainly caused by smoking cigarettes and other tobacco products. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I have less sympathy for people with lung cancer than for other types of cancer.
- Q3. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: There should be a national lung cancer screening programme to help people with lung cancer get diagnosed early.

Further analysis

Symptom recognition

Raising awareness of lung cancer symptoms is important, as recognising potential symptoms and seeking medical advice can support earlier diagnosis and better outcomes.

In 2026, 18.2% of people in South Africa said they did not know any symptoms of lung cancer, up slightly from 16.8% in 2023. This was the lowest proportion recorded across all countries included in the survey, indicating particularly strong levels of symptom awareness. Nevertheless, almost one in five respondents were still unable to identify a symptom, highlighting the importance of continued awareness activity.

Among respondents who could identify symptoms, the most commonly recognised were persistent cough, coughing up blood, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, and chest pain. Respondents also

identified fatigue, unexplained weight loss, loss of appetite, wheezing, and hoarseness. Compared with many other countries, recognition extended across a broad range of symptoms although gaps in awareness remain.

Chart 1. Percentage of respondents who indicated they did not know any symptoms, by country

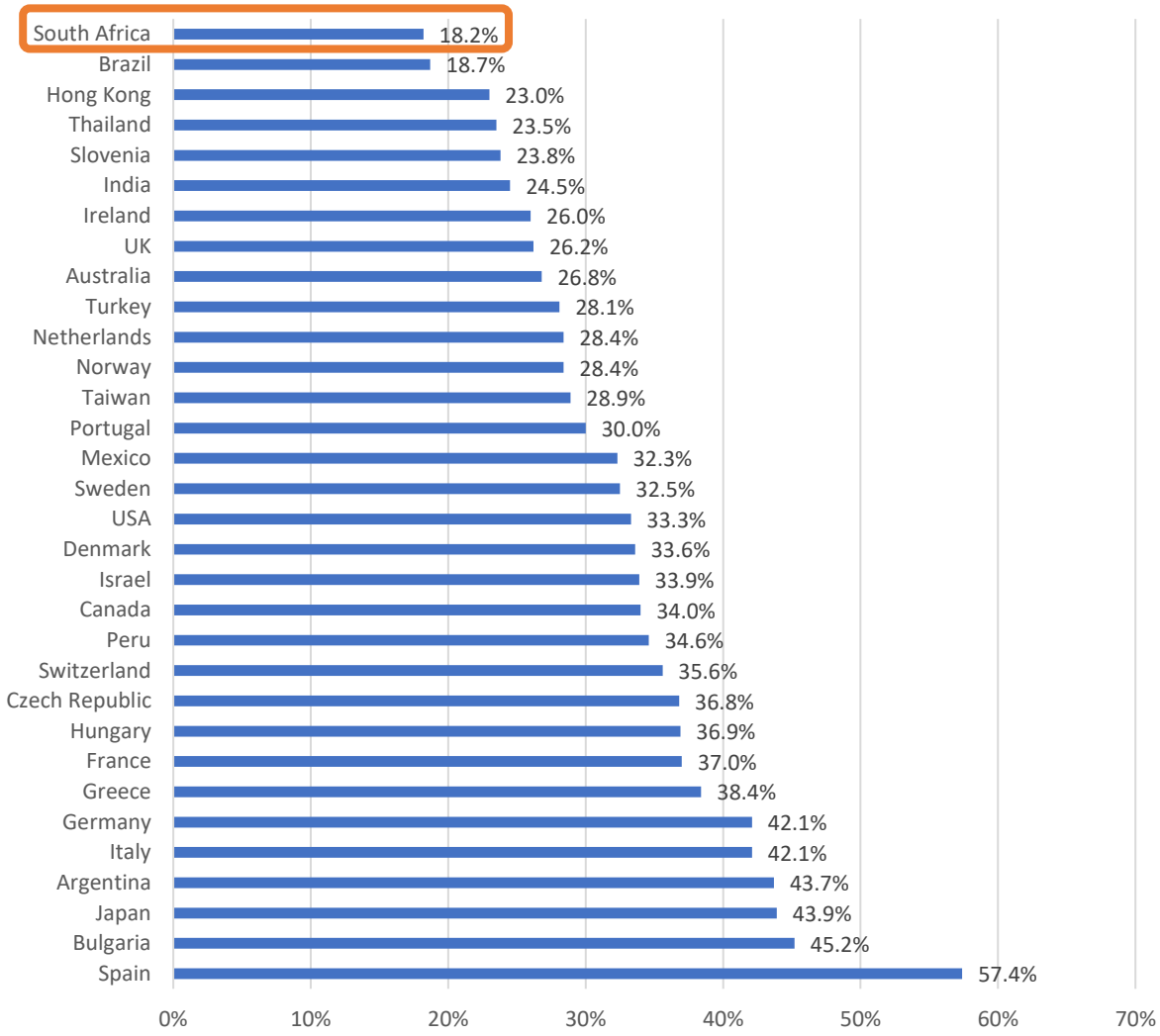


Chart 2. Percentage of respondents in South Africa who indicated they did not know any symptoms, by age

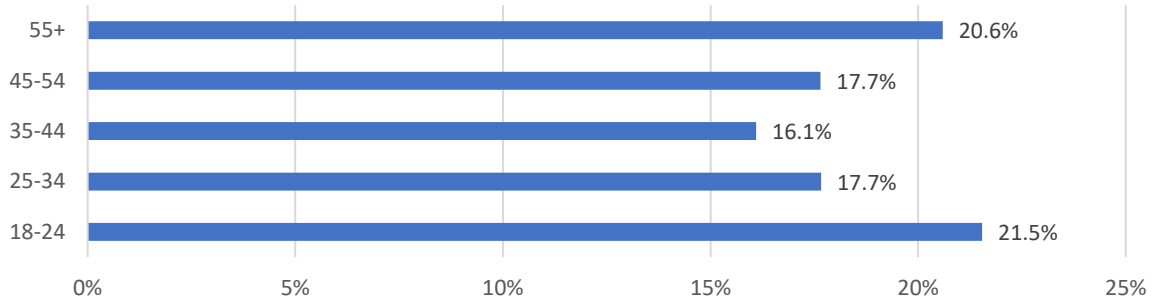
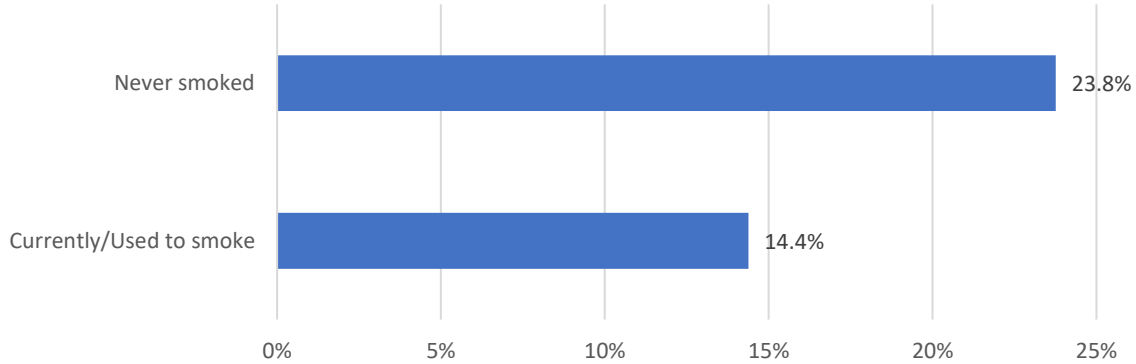


Chart 3. Percentage of respondents in South Africa who indicated they did not know any symptoms of smoking, by status



Attitudes towards lung cancer

Around 60-70% of lung cancer cases are linked to smoking, which can contribute to stigma and blame associated with the disease.[1] This is concerning because lung cancer can affect people regardless of smoking history, while stigma and misconceptions may discourage some individuals from seeking medical advice when symptoms first appear. The GLCC believes that everyone living with lung cancer deserves access to high-quality treatment and care, regardless of the cause of their cancer.

In South Africa, 53.8% of respondents said that they had less sympathy for people with lung cancer than for people with other types of cancer, up from 48.4% in 2023. This is substantially higher than the 2026 global average of 39.2% with South Africa recording the third highest level of stigma in the survey. Reported stigma was particularly high among younger respondents, with 62.6% of 18-24 year olds expressing this view.

These findings suggest that stigma towards people with lung cancer remains a significant issue in South Africa and highlights the importance of continued efforts to challenge blame and misconceptions associated with the disease.

[1] World Health Organization (2026) *Lung cancer*. Available at: https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/lung-cancer (Accessed: 11 August 2026)

Chart 4. Percentage of respondents who agree with the statement they have less sympathy for people with lung cancer than for other types of cancer, by country

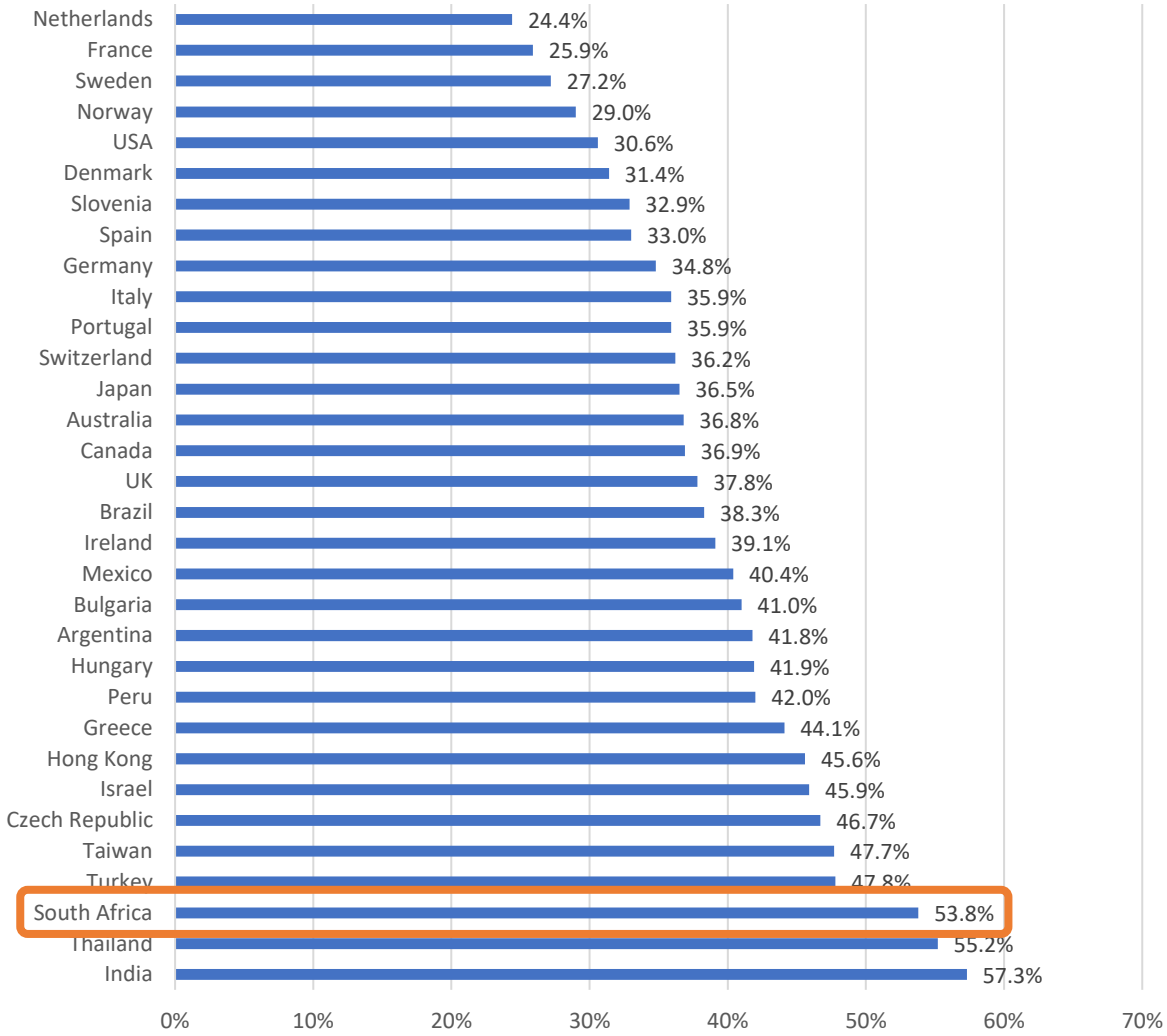


Chart 5. Percentage of respondents in South Africa who agree with the statement they have less sympathy for people with lung cancer than for other types of cancer, by age

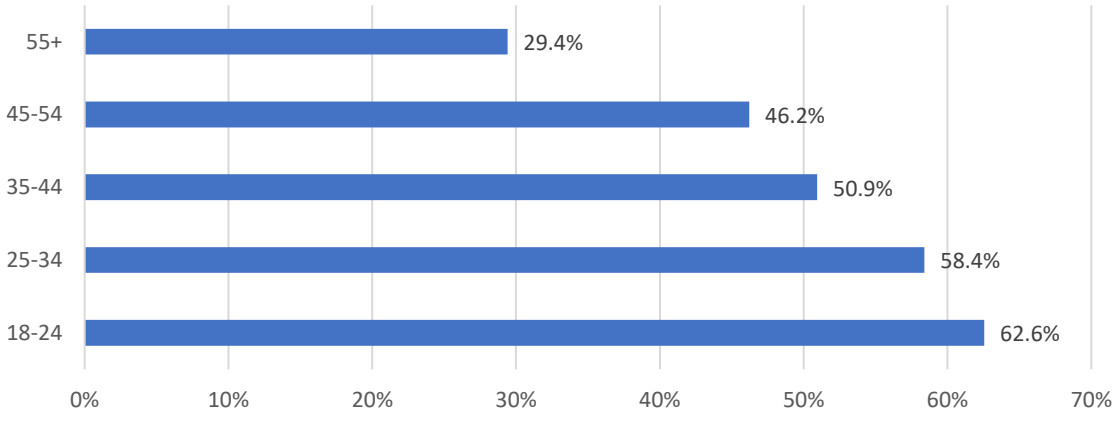
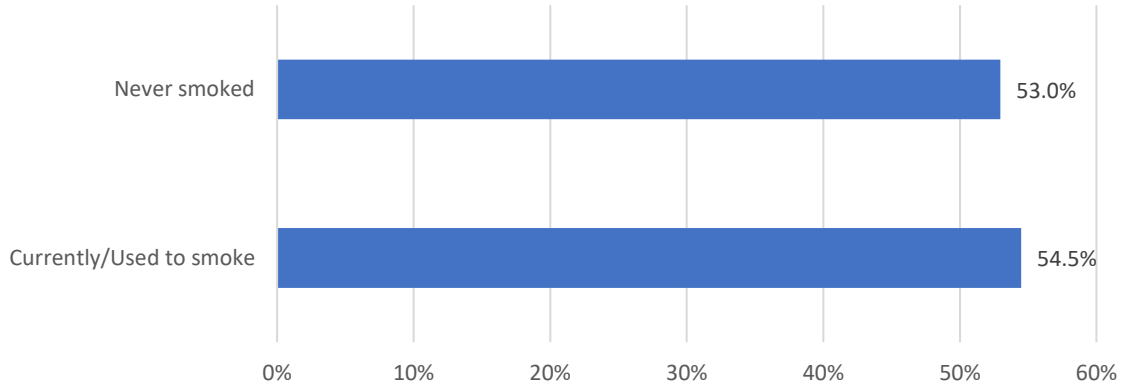


Chart 6. Percentage of respondents in South Africa who agree with the statement they have less sympathy for people with lung cancer than for other types of cancer, by smoking status



Views on lung cancer screening

A national lung cancer screening programme is a key measure to reduce the substantial burden that lung cancer places on individuals, families and healthcare systems. Lung cancer screening using low-dose computed tomography (LDCT) can save lives by detecting the disease at an earlier, more treatable stage. A large clinical trial found that LDCT screening reduced lung cancer mortality by 24% in men and 33% in women after 10 years of follow-up compared with no screening.[2]

Support for lung cancer screening was exceptionally strong in South Africa, with 93.5% of respondents agreeing that there should be a national lung cancer screening programme to help people with lung cancer get diagnosed early. While this was down slightly from 95.3% in 2023, South Africa recorded the highest level of support among all countries included in the survey. These findings demonstrate overwhelming public support for measures to improve earlier diagnosis.

South Africa does not currently have a national lung cancer screening programme. Given the high level of public support identified in this survey and the evidence demonstrating the benefits of lung cancer screening, there is an opportunity to explore approaches that could improve access to earlier detection, particularly for people at greatest risk of developing lung cancer.

[2] de Koning, H.J., van der Aalst, C.M., de Jong, P.A. *et al.* (2020) 'Reduced Lung-Cancer Mortality with Volume CT Screening in a Randomized Trial', *New England Journal of Medicine*, 382(6), pp. 503-513. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMoa1911793

Chart 7. Percentage of respondents who agree there should be a national lung cancer screening programme to help people with lung cancer get diagnosed early, by country

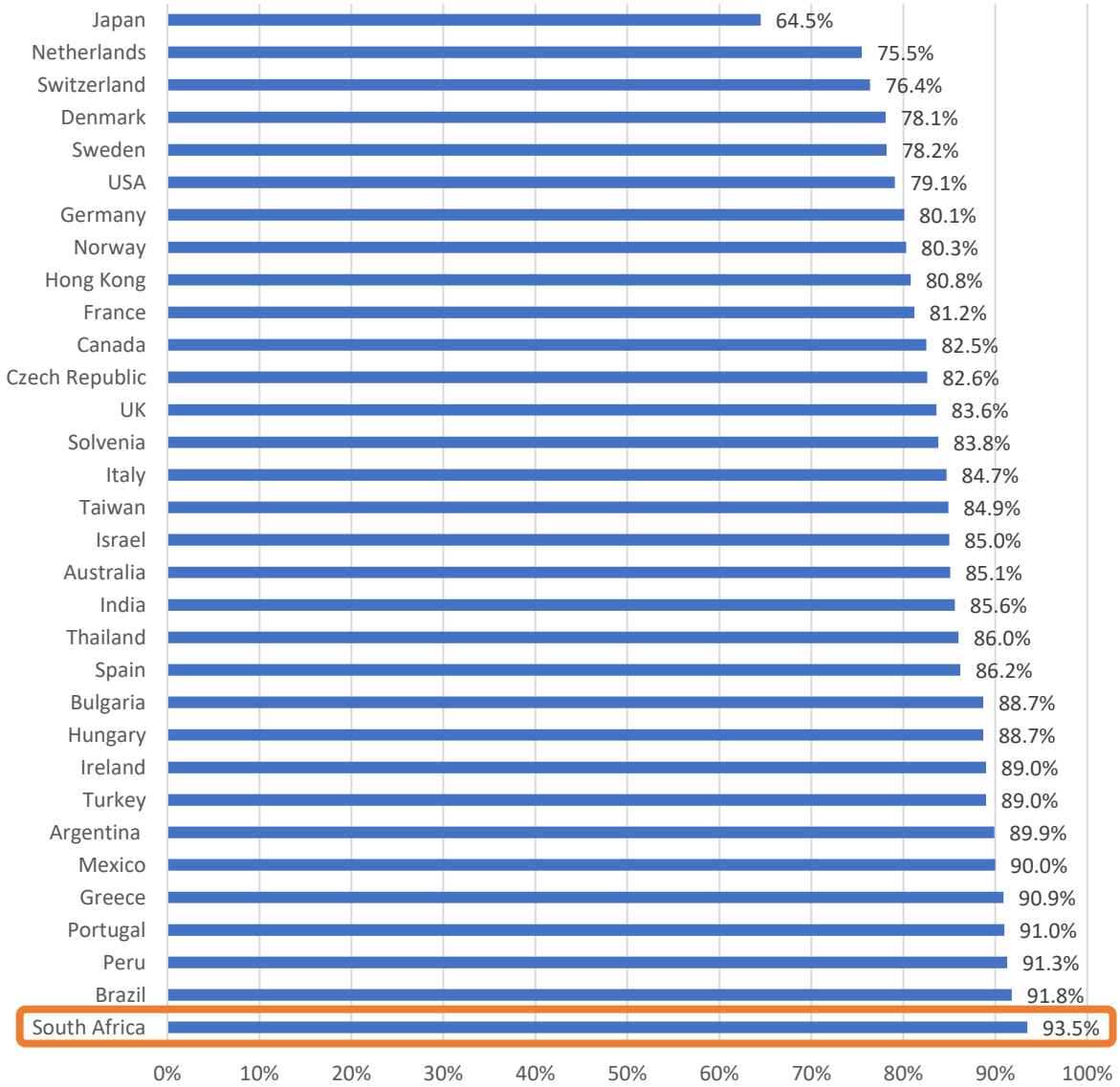


Chart 8. Percentage of respondents in South Africa who agree there should be a national lung cancer screening programme to help people with lung cancer get diagnosed early, by age

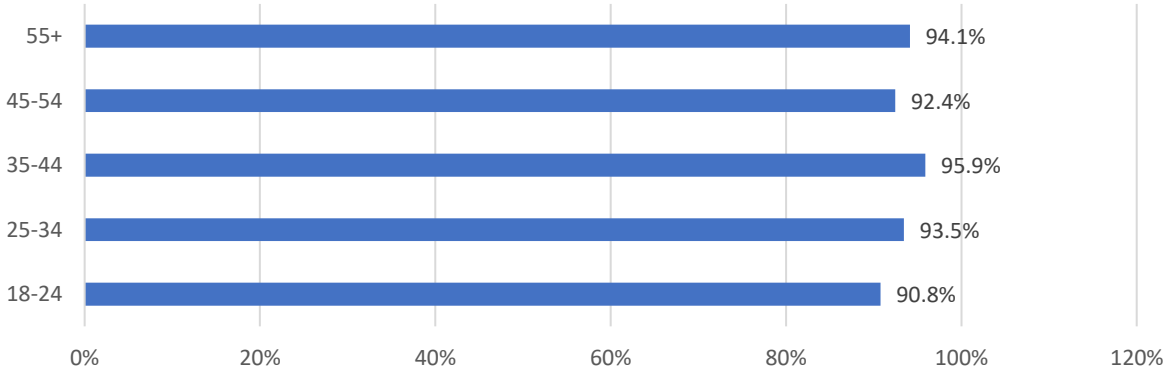
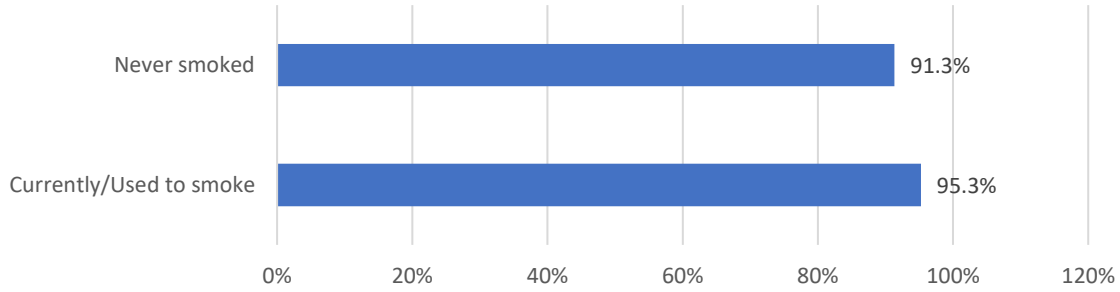


Chart 9. Percentage of respondents in South Africa who agree there should be a national lung cancer screening programme to help people with lung cancer get diagnosed early, by smoking status



Conclusion

The 2026 findings show that South Africa has high levels of symptom awareness and records the highest level of support for lung cancer screening among all countries included in the survey. Awareness of lung cancer symptoms is higher than in any other country surveyed, although almost one in five people are still unable to identify a single symptom of lung cancer.

At the same time, stigma surrounding lung cancer remains a significant challenge. More than half of respondents reported having less sympathy for people with lung cancer than for those with other cancers, placing South Africa among the countries with the highest levels of stigma recorded in the study.

Public support for lung cancer screening is exceptionally strong, with 93.5% of respondents supporting a national screening programme. This demonstrates strong public backing for efforts to improve earlier diagnosis and reduce the burden of lung cancer.

These findings highlight the need for continued investment in public awareness, action to challenge stigma and misconceptions, and ongoing efforts to improve access to early detection and diagnosis. The GLCC will use these findings to support advocacy and awareness activities aimed at improving outcomes for everyone affected by lung cancer in South Africa.

More information

Established in 2001, the GLCC comprises 44 non-government patient organisations from 32 nations / territories: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Portugal, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, UK and USA.

The GLCC promotes global understanding of lung cancer and the right of patients to effective early detection, better treatment and supportive care. By serving as the international voice of lung cancer patients, the GLCC is committed to improving disease outcomes for all.

For more information about this study and the work of the GLCC please visit: www.lungcancercoalition.org or email our secretariat at: glcc@roycastle.org.