

**MACMILLAN**  
CANCER SUPPORT

# SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF CANCER

And how to reduce your risk



# About this leaflet

**This leaflet is about the main symptoms of cancer and how to recognise them. It also has information about how to reduce your risk of developing cancer.**

In the UK, more than 356,000 people are diagnosed with cancer each year. People of any age can get cancer, but it is most common over the age of 50.

The earlier cancer is found, the more likely it is to be successfully treated. Knowing which symptoms to look for and when to see your family doctor (GP) could make a real difference. If you have any symptoms, it is important to get them checked.

This leaflet tells you how to:

- recognise the symptoms of cancer
- reduce your risk of cancer.

We have included quotes from people affected by cancer, which you might find helpful. They are from people who have chosen to share their story with us.

We've also listed some other useful organisations at the end of this leaflet (pages 20 to 21).

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# How to recognise the symptoms of cancer

## Know your body

If you know your body and what is normal for you, it will help you to be aware of any changes.

People sometimes think a change in their body isn't worth bothering their GP about. Or they may feel embarrassed talking about it. But if you notice a change in how you feel or how your body works, it is better to be safe and get it checked.

Always see your GP if you have symptoms that are ongoing, unexplained or unusual for you.

## Ongoing symptoms

If you have a symptom that lasts for more than three weeks, see your GP. This might be a cough that doesn't go away, a change in bowel habits, a mouth ulcer that doesn't heal, or feeling bloated most days.

## Unexplained symptoms

This means a symptom that doesn't have an obvious cause. For example, having a lump or bleeding without any injury.

## Symptoms that are unusual for you

This means a change in your body that is not normal for you. This might be:

- a change in a cough you have had for a long time
- a change to a mole
- new unexplained bleeding
- a change in the skin on your breast.

Having any of these symptoms does not usually mean you have cancer, but it is sensible to speak to your GP. The cause of the symptoms is probably nothing to worry about, but it could be a sign of something that needs treatment.

If it is cancer, the sooner it is found, the more likely it is to be cured. And if it's nothing serious, your GP can tell you not to worry.

If you have already been to see your GP but the symptoms haven't gone away, it is important to see them again after a week or so.

'I was reluctant to go the doctor and get checked out. But if I hadn't gone as soon as I did, it could have so easily been a different outcome for me.'

**Craig**

# Symptoms to look out for

If you have any of the symptoms listed over the next few pages, see your GP. You are not wasting their time by getting your symptoms checked.

## Unexplained bleeding

Any unexplained bleeding is a sign that something might be wrong. You should always get this checked by your GP.

This can include blood in your wee, poo, spit or vomit. For women, it also includes vaginal bleeding in between periods, after sex or after the menopause.

## Weight loss

If you have lost weight without trying to and it can't be explained by changes in your diet or exercise, tell your GP.

## Lumps

If you notice an unexplained lump or swelling anywhere on your body, see your GP. It can be useful to tell them how long it has been there and if it is getting bigger or causes discomfort.

## **Pain**

If you have a new, unexplained pain anywhere in your body that lasts for three weeks or more, see your GP to get it checked.

## **Extreme tiredness**

Tell your GP if you have been feeling more tired (fatigued) than usual for some time, with no obvious reason.

## **A sore that doesn't heal**

Most sores heal very quickly. If you have a sore or mouth ulcer that hasn't healed after several weeks, you should get it checked by your GP.

## **Changes to a mole**

See your GP straight away if you notice a new mole, a change in an existing mole, or a change in your skin.

## **An ongoing cough**

Tell your GP if you have a cough that has lasted for more than three weeks, or if it gets worse.

## Hoarse voice

You may get a hoarse voice if you have a cold, but if it lasts longer than three weeks you should get it checked by your GP.

## Breathlessness

It is normal to be out of breath sometimes. But you should talk to your GP if you are breathless for no reason or it is getting worse.

## Change in bowel habit

Lots of things can cause looser poo or diarrhoea, but if it lasts for three weeks or more you should talk to your GP.

## Problems weeing

Talk to your GP if you have any problems weeing, such as needing to wee suddenly, or pain when you wee.

## Trouble swallowing

If you have any difficulty swallowing or chewing, or a feeling that something is stuck in your throat, you should get it checked by your GP.

## Indigestion and heartburn

You may get indigestion or heartburn after eating a large, spicy meal. But you should see your GP if you get a lot of heartburn or indigestion, or if it is very painful.

## Bloating

If you feel bloated (have a swollen tummy) most of the time, talk to your GP so they can check it for you.

## Night sweats

Some infections can cause night sweats and some women have them when they are going through the menopause. But if you have severe night sweats that drench your bed clothes, you should get them checked by your GP.

# How to reduce your risk of cancer

## Don't smoke

Smokers are much more likely to get cancer than non-smokers. Smoking increases the risk of several types of cancer, including cancers of the lung, mouth, gullet, stomach, pancreas, kidney, bladder and cervix, and some types of leukaemia. In the UK, almost one in five cancers (20%) are caused by smoking.

Smoking can make some types of cancer grow more quickly. This may be because smoking weakens the body's immune system and some of the chemicals in cigarette smoke may help the tumour to grow.

'I know I'll never smoke another cigarette. Knowing that it can cause lung cancer, I would be mad to keep smoking.'

**Carole**

There is lots of help available if you want to stop smoking. Ask your GP for advice, or contact your national stop-smoking service:

### **Smokefree (England)**

**Tel** 0300 123 1044

(Mon to Fri, 9am to 8pm, Sat to Sun, 11am to 4pm)

**[www.nhs.uk/smokefree](http://www.nhs.uk/smokefree)**

### **Smokeline (Scotland)**

**Tel** 0800 84 84 84

(Mon to Sun, 8am to 10pm)

**[www.canstopsmoking.com](http://www.canstopsmoking.com)**

### **Stop Smoking Wales**

**Tel** 0800 085 2219

(Mon to Fri, 9am to 5pm)

**[www.stopsmokingwales.com](http://www.stopsmokingwales.com)**

### **Want2stop (Northern Ireland)**

**[www.want2stop.info](http://www.want2stop.info)**

## Eat a well-balanced diet

Experts think that up to 1 in 10 cancers (10%) in the UK may be linked to diet. A healthy diet can reduce your risk of cancer, particularly bowel cancer. It can also lower your risk of other health problems, such as heart disease and diabetes.

You should eat foods that are high in fibre, such as wholegrain bread and pasta, beans and oatmeal. Try to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables every day.

Limiting how much salt, red meat and processed meat you eat is also important. Processed meats are meats that have had preservatives added to them, or that have been preserved by salting, curing or smoking. They include sausages, ham and burgers.

## Keep to a healthy weight

Try to keep your weight within the normal range for your height. Being overweight increases the risk of several cancers, including cancers of the pancreas, bowel, womb and kidney. It can also increase the risk of breast cancer after the menopause.

If you are overweight, getting to a healthy weight is one of the best ways to reduce your risk of cancer. Your GP or practice nurse can talk to you about the ideal weight for your height.

The best way to lose weight is by eating a balanced diet and being more physically active.



## Be physically active

Many studies have found that regular physical activity can reduce the risk of cancer.

You should try to do at least two and a half hours of activity each week. This can be split into 10 to 30 minute sessions throughout the week. You can increase these times as you get used to exercising.

You don't have to go to the gym to be active. Regular walking, cycling or swimming can be enough. During any activity, you should feel you are breathing more quickly but still able to talk. Your pulse should be slightly faster than normal.

If you are not used to doing exercise, your GP can advise you on getting started.

## Cut down on alcohol

Drinking alcohol, especially more than the recommended limits, can increase your cancer risk. About 4 in 100 cancers in the UK (4%) are linked to alcohol.

Alcohol increases the risk of cancers of the mouth and throat. It is also linked to cancers of the bowel, liver and breast. In general, the more you drink, the higher your risk.

NHS guidelines suggest that both men and women should:

- not regularly drink more than 14 units of alcohol in a week
- spread the alcohol units they drink in a week over three or more days
- try to have several alcohol-free days every week.

A unit of alcohol is half a pint of ordinary strength beer, lager or cider, one small glass (125ml) of wine or a single measure (25ml) of spirits.

There is more information about alcohol and drinking guidelines at **[drinkaware.co.uk](https://www.drinkaware.co.uk)**

## Take care in the sun and don't use sunbeds

Spending some time outside in the sun helps you stay healthy. Our bodies use the UVB rays in sunlight to make vitamin D. This is important for bone health and reduces the risk of many illnesses, including cancer. But it is also important to protect your skin from burning, as this can increase your risk of skin cancers.

If you are going to be out in the sun for longer than a few minutes, use a suncream with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30. You should wear loose, cotton clothes that cover your body, as well as a hat.

Avoid using a sunbed or sun lamp. If you want to look tanned, use fake-tanning lotions or sprays instead.

## Go to cancer screenings when invited

It is important to attend any cancer screenings that you are invited to. This helps to detect cancer early, which is when treatment is most effective.

In the UK, there are screening programmes for bowel cancer, breast cancer and cervical cancer. If you are registered with a GP, you should automatically be invited to screening when you reach the age when each screening programme starts.

However, screening doesn't always detect cancers. If you have new symptoms, even if you have had a normal screening test, you should get them checked by your GP.

There's more information about the screening programmes on these websites:

- **[cancerscreening.nhs.uk](https://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk)** (England)
- **[nhsinform.co.uk/screening](https://www.nhsinform.co.uk/screening)** (Scotland)
- **[screening.nhs.uk/wales](https://www.screening.nhs.uk/wales)** (Wales)
- **[cancerscreening.hscni.net](https://www.cancerscreening.hscni.net)** (Northern Ireland)



# Further information and support

Cancer is the toughest fight most of us will ever face. But you don't have to go through it alone. The Macmillan team is with you every step of the way.

## Order our information

We have a wide range of cancer information available to order for free at **[be.macmillan.org.uk](http://be.macmillan.org.uk)** or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Our information is also available online at **[macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support](http://macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support)**

## Talk to us

You can call the Macmillan Support Line on **0808 808 00 00**. Our cancer support specialists can help with medical questions, money worries or just be there to listen if you need someone to talk to. Our free, confidential phone line is open 7 days a week, 9am to 8pm.

# Other useful organisations

## **Cancer Black Care**

**Tel** 020 8961 4151

**Email** info@

cancerblackcare.org.uk

**www.cancerblackcare.org.uk**

Offers UK-wide information and support for people with cancer, as well as their friends, carers and families, with a focus on those from BME communities.

## **Cancer Focus Northern Ireland Helpline**

0800 783 3339

(Mon to Fri, 9am to 1pm)

**Email** helpline@

cancerfocusni.org

**www.cancerfocusni.org**

Offers a variety of services to people affected by cancer in Northern Ireland, including a free helpline, counselling and links to local support groups.

## **Cancer Research UK Helpline**

0808 800 4040

(Mon to Fri, 9am to 5pm)

**www.cancerresearchuk.org**

A UK-wide organisation that has patient information on all types of cancer. Also has a clinical trials database.

## **Cancer Support Scotland**

**Tel** 0800 652 4531

(Mon to Fri, 9am to 5pm)

**Email** info@cancer

supportscotland.org

**www.cancer**

**supportscotland.org**

Runs cancer support groups throughout Scotland. Also offers free complementary therapies and counselling to anyone affected by cancer.

**Maggie's Centres****Tel** 0300 123 1801**Email** enquiries@  
maggiescentres.org**www.maggies  
centres.org**

Has a network of centres in various locations throughout the UK. Provides free information about cancer and financial benefits. Also offers emotional and social support to people with cancer, their family, and friends.

**Tenovus****Helpline** 0808 808 1010  
(Daily, 8am to 8pm)**Email** info@  
tenovuscancercare.org.uk**www.tenovus  
cancercare.org.uk**

Aims to help everyone in the UK get equal access to cancer treatment and support. Funds research and provides support such as mobile cancer support units, a free helpline, an 'Ask the nurse' service on the website and benefits advice.



You can search for more organisations on our website at **macmillan.org.uk/organisations** or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

## Disclaimer

We make every effort to ensure that the information we provide is accurate and up to date but it should not be relied upon as a substitute for specialist professional advice tailored to your situation. So far as is permitted by law, Macmillan does not accept liability in relation to the use of any information contained in this publication, or third-party information or websites included or referred to in it. Some photos are of models.

## Thanks

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With thanks to: Dr Sally Clive, Consultant Medical Oncologist; and Professor Denis Talbot, Consultant Medical Oncologist.

Thanks also to the people affected by cancer who reviewed this edition, and those who shared their stories.

We welcome feedback on our information. If you have any, please contact [\*\*cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk\*\*](mailto:cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk)

## Sources

We've listed a sample of the sources used in this publication below. If you'd like further information about the sources we use, please contact us at [\*\*bookletfeedback@macmillan.org.uk\*\*](mailto:bookletfeedback@macmillan.org.uk)

Health Improvement Scotland. Scottish referral guidelines for suspected cancer. August 2014.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE).

Suspected cancer: recognition and referral [NG12]. June 2015.

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We're here to help everyone with cancer live life as fully as they can, providing physical, financial and emotional support. So whatever cancer throws your way, we're right there with you. For information, support or just someone to talk to, call **0808 808 00 00** or visit **macmillan.org.uk**

Would you prefer to speak to us in another language? Interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use. Are you deaf or hard of hearing? Call us using NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the NGT Lite app.

Need information in different languages or formats? We produce information in audio, eBooks, easy read, Braille, large print and translations. To order these, visit **macmillan.org.uk/otherformats** or call our support line.

**MACMILLAN**  
**CANCER SUPPORT**  
**RIGHT THERE WITH YOU**

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Certified member	<a href="http://www.theinformationstandard.org">www.theinformationstandard.org</a>

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