



*reduce the risk*

CANCER RESEARCH UK



Wish you knew  
the signs of cancer?



Today, more people than ever are surviving cancer. This is because of better treatments and early detection.

When cancer is found at an early stage, it is easier to treat and many people can be cured. That's why it's so important to know what's normal for your body and to look out for any changes.

### In this booklet **you can find out:**

- what symptoms women should look out for
- why it is important to get these symptoms checked out by your doctor.

# Possible symptoms of cancer

More than one in three of us in the UK will develop cancer. The disease mainly affects older people, with nearly nine out of ten cases in people over 50 years old.

There are more than 200 different types of cancer, which can cause many different symptoms. The three most common cancers affecting women in the UK are breast, bowel and lung cancer. You can find out more about different types of cancer on our website, [www.cancerhelp.org.uk](http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk)

Experts agree that the symptoms explained in this leaflet are the most important ones to look out for. They are often caused by problems that are much less serious than cancer, but it's best to be safe. So if you notice any unexplained persistent changes in your body, you should always get them checked out by your doctor.

The key symptoms that you should look out for are listed below and on the following diagram. Do you have any of them? If so, it's best to make an appointment with your doctor.

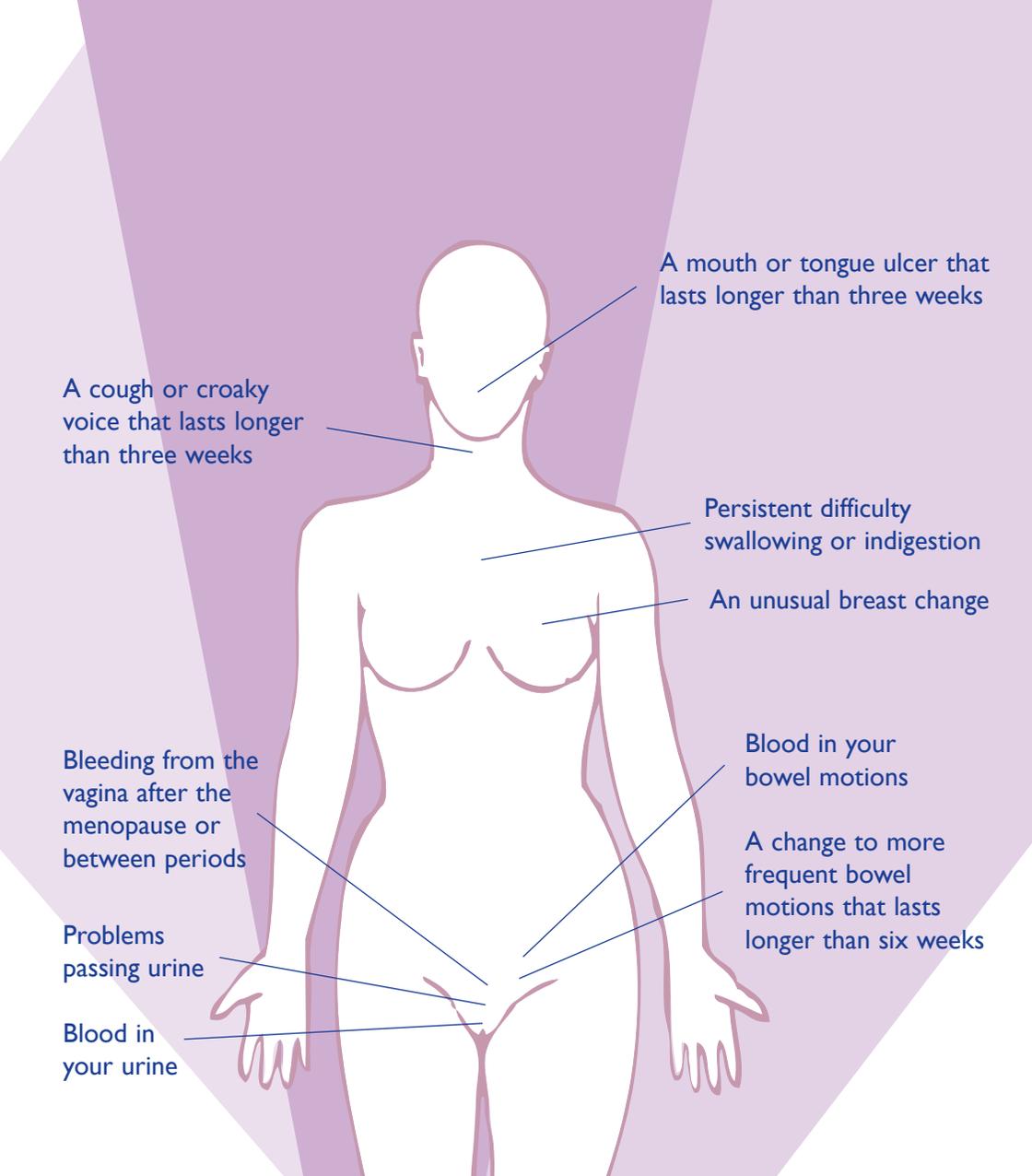
These symptoms will usually turn out to be due to something other than cancer. But if it is cancer, finding it early will offer the best chance of successful treatment.

## Symptoms anywhere on your body:

- **An unusual lump or swelling (including on the neck, armpit, breast, abdomen or groin)**
- **A change in size, shape or colour of a mole**
- **A sore that won't heal after several weeks**

## Other symptoms:

- **Unexplained weight loss or heavy night sweats**
- **An unexplained pain or ache that lasts longer than four weeks**



A cough or croaky voice that lasts longer than three weeks

A mouth or tongue ulcer that lasts longer than three weeks

Persistent difficulty swallowing or indigestion

An unusual breast change

Bleeding from the vagina after the menopause or between periods

Blood in your bowel motions

Problems passing urine

A change to more frequent bowel motions that lasts longer than six weeks

Blood in your urine

**“If you are concerned about any symptom, it is very sensible to seek advice”**

Dr Ian Watson, Saddleworth Medical Practice, Oldham

# Common questions

## **Does finding cancer early really make a difference?**

In the early stages, a cancer is more likely to be small, easier to remove and less likely to have spread. As cancers grow they may spread to other parts of the body, which makes them much harder to treat.

Studies have shown that ignoring symptoms can affect the chances of surviving cancer. So it's important to see your doctor promptly if you have any of the symptoms mentioned in this leaflet.

## **Won't I be wasting the doctor's time?**

Experts agree that the symptoms in this leaflet need to be checked out by a doctor. So you won't be wasting the doctor's time. If you still feel worried, take this leaflet with you to explain to the doctor why you have made an appointment.

## **I'm not registered with a doctor.**

### **Who should I contact?**

To find a doctors' surgery in your local area, you can:

- call NHS Direct on 0845 4647
- search under 'Doctors' on the NHS website ([www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)), or
- look in your local phone book.

If the surgery you first speak to can't take on new patients, they may be able to recommend another surgery nearby that can see you.

## **My doctor says I don't have cancer, but my symptoms aren't going away. What should I do?**

It would be a good idea to go back to see your doctor and talk this over. If you still have the same symptoms, or if they have got worse, then your doctor will want to know.

# Get to know what's normal for you and look out for these changes

## **A cough or croaky voice that lasts longer than three weeks**

A cough and croaky voice are common symptoms of a cold. They often go away after a week or so and usually aren't signs of anything serious. But if they last for longer than three weeks, if you cough up blood, or if an existing cough gets worse, you should go to your doctor. If you smoke you should pay extra attention to these symptoms, as you are more likely to suffer from throat and lung diseases.

## **A mouth or tongue ulcer that lasts longer than three weeks**

Many people get mouth ulcers when they are run down and this is usually nothing to worry about. The lining of the mouth renews itself every two weeks or so, which is why ulcers usually don't last longer than that. But any single ulcer that lasts for longer than three weeks without healing could be a sign of mouth cancer and should be reported to your doctor.

## **Persistent difficulty swallowing or indigestion**

A number of medical conditions can make it difficult to swallow. But if you are having difficulty swallowing and the problem doesn't go away after a couple of weeks, it should be checked out.

It is normal to feel slight discomfort or pain sometimes after eating a large, fatty or spicy meal. But if you are experiencing indigestion a lot, or if it is particularly painful, then you should see your doctor.



### **An unusual lump or swelling anywhere on your body**

Many women know that any unusual lump in their breast should be checked out by their doctor. But persistent lumps in other parts of the body should also be taken seriously. This includes lumps and swellings in your neck, armpit, abdomen or groin.

If these symptoms last for three weeks or more, they could be signs of cancer. A good time to notice unusual lumps and bumps is in the bath or shower.

### **An unusual breast change**

Lumps are not the only changes to the breast that should be reported to a doctor. Also look out for any change in size, shape or feel of a breast, a change to the skin texture, redness, a nipple change or pain in one breast.

### **A sore that won't heal after several weeks**

Our skin repairs itself very quickly, and any damage usually heals within a week or so. When a spot, wart or sore doesn't heal and lasts for several weeks, it could need treatment. Even if it is painless, you should see your doctor.

### **A change in size, shape or colour of a mole**

Most moles remain harmless throughout our lives. But new moles that appear, ones that change over weeks or months, or ones that are crusty or ooze, should be checked out by a doctor.

It's important to keep an eye on your skin and look out for changes – ask your partner or a friend to check areas you can't see, such as your back. This is particularly important if you have fair, freckly or moley skin that tends to burn easily.



# “Patients worry too much about If a symptom turns out to be nothing, I am

Dr Doris Lister, Abbey Medical

## Problems passing urine

Infections are the most common cause of pain and difficulty passing urine. But needing to pass urine urgently or more often than usual could be a sign of cancer of the bladder, ovary or lining of the womb and should be checked out.

## Blood in your urine

Blood in your urine should always be reported to a doctor. Usually it isn't caused by cancer and can be treated quickly and easily. But it could be a sign of something more serious. Either way, the best thing to do is to go to your doctor.

## Blood in your bowel motions

The most common cause of blood in the bowel motions is piles. This condition is brought on by straining when going to the toilet. But blood in your bowel movements can be a symptom of a more serious condition such as bowel cancer, so it's very important to get it checked out.

## A change to more frequent bowel motions that lasts longer than six weeks

Stomach bugs and food poisoning are the most usual causes of loose, frequent bowel motions, or diarrhoea. This doesn't usually last long, clearing up within a few days. If you have noticed a change in your bowel habits lasting longer than six weeks, it could be a more serious bowel problem.

Most cases of bowel cancer are in older people, with more than nine out of ten cases in people over 50. If you're younger, bowel changes are likely to be caused by other medical conditions. But if you have noticed any lasting bowel changes, you should see your doctor.

Without wasting the doctor's time.

As happy as the patient. So don't hold back!"

Medical Centre, Camden, London

### **Bleeding from the vagina after the menopause or between periods**

Bleeding between periods, or 'spotting' as it is sometimes known, is a fairly common side effect of the contraceptive pill. But bleeding from the vagina between periods, after sex or after the menopause can sometimes be a sign of a more serious problem and should be checked out.

### **Unexplained weight loss or heavy night sweats**

Small weight changes over time are quite normal. But if you have noticeably lost weight without dieting, this could be a sign of cancer and should be checked out.

Around the time of the menopause, women often experience heavy night sweats. They can also be brought on by infections and certain medications. But night sweats can be caused by certain types of cancer. Experiencing night sweats and unexplained weight loss together can suggest cancer, and you should see your doctor.

### **An unexplained pain or ache that lasts longer than four weeks**

Pain is one of our bodies' ways of telling us that something is wrong. As we get older, many of us have aches and pains. It can be very difficult to know whether something is serious or not. In general, you should check out any continuous unexplained pain, or any unexplained pain that comes and goes over a time of longer than four weeks.



## Further information

### About cancer

For information about cancer, visit our patient information website [www.cancerhelp.org.uk](http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk)

If you have any symptoms that concern you, call NHS Direct on **0845 4647**.

To talk in confidence about cancer, call our information nurses on **020 7061 8355** or **0800 226 237**.

### Reduce the Risk

To find out more about our Reduce the Risk campaign, visit [www.reduce therisk.org.uk](http://www.reduce therisk.org.uk)

To order this and other cancer awareness leaflets, go to [www.cancerresearchuk.org/leaflets](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/leaflets)

### About Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK is the world's leading independent organisation dedicated to finding out how to prevent, diagnose and treat cancer. If you would like to support our work, please call **020 7121 6699** or visit our website, [www.cancerresearchuk.org](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org)

*Together we will beat cancer*