

A practical guide to understanding cancer

**WE ARE  
MACMILLAN.  
CANCER SUPPORT**

# **SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF CANCER**

## **— WHAT TO BE AWARE OF**



**'I was reluctant to go to 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

**More than 330,000 people are diagnosed with cancer in the UK each year. People of any age can get cancer, but it's most common over the age of 50.**

**The earlier cancer is found, the more likely it is to be cured.**

**Knowing what changes to look for and when to see your GP could make a real difference. Don't be scared – if you have symptoms, get them checked.**

**This leaflet tells you how to:**

- **recognise the early signs of cancer**
- **reduce your risk of cancer.**

# Symptoms to look out for

Knowing how your body normally looks and feels can help you notice any early changes that could be caused by cancer.

Always see your doctor 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 doctor. 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. It could be a change in a cough you've had for a long time, a change to a mole, or a change in the skin on your breast.

# Recognise the symptoms of cancer

If you have any of the symptoms listed on this page, see your doctor.

## Unexplained bleeding

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

This may be blood in your urine, bowel motions, 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 doctor.

## Lumps

If you notice an unexplained lump or swelling anywhere on your body, see your doctor. 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 that lasts for three weeks or more, see your doctor to get it checked.

Having any of these symptoms does not usually mean you have cancer, but it is sensible to get them checked. The cause of the symptoms is probably nothing to worry about. But they 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 doctor can put your mind at rest.

If you've already been to your doctor with symptoms but they haven't gone away, it is important to see your doctor again.

You are not wasting your doctor's time by getting your symptoms checked.





# How to reduce your risk of cancer

## Don't smoke

Smokers are much more likely to get cancer than non-smokers. Smoking is linked to many types of cancer, including lung, mouth, throat, kidney, bladder, gullet and bowel cancers.

Almost 1 in 5 cancers in the UK is caused by smoking (20%).

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

Carole

## Eat a well-balanced diet

Eat more fruit, vegetables and wholegrain foods.  
Cut down on red meat and processed meats like bacon.

### Keep to a healthy weight

Try to keep your weight within the normal range for your height. Being overweight increases the risk of many types of cancer, as well as other health problems. The best way to lose weight is by eating a balanced diet and being more physically active.

### Be active

Regular physical activity can reduce the risk of cancer. Any exercise helps, but aim to do at least two and a half hours of moderate-intensity physical activity a week. This could be 30 minutes of activity, five days a week.

During moderate-intensity activity, your breathing gets quicker and deeper but you can still talk. Your heart beats faster than normal but isn't racing, and your body warms up.

### Cut down on alcohol

Alcohol is linked to several types of cancer, including mouth, throat, breast and bowel cancers. The less alcohol you drink, the lower your risk of cancer.



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

Spending some time outside in the sun helps your body make vitamin D, which is needed for healthy bones. But it's important to protect your skin from burning, as this can increase your risk of skin cancers. If you're 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. It should also have a UVA star rating of 4 or 5.

If you want to look tanned, use fake tanning lotions or sprays. Avoid using sunbeds or sunlamps.



## Further information and support

We have more information on cancer types, tests, treatments and living with and after cancer. We also have details of other helpful organisations and support groups in your area. You can contact us using the following details:

**Macmillan Cancer Support**  
89 Albert Embankment,  
London SE1 7UQ

**General enquiries:**  
**020 7840 7840**

**Questions about cancer?** Call free on **0808 808 00 00** (Mon–Fri, 9am–8pm)

**Hard of hearing?** Use textphone **0808 808 0121**, or Text Relay.

### **Non-English speaker?**

Interpreters available. Alternatively, visit **macmillan.org.uk**

To order any of our booklets, visit **be.macmillan.org.uk** or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

# Other useful organisations

## **American Cancer Society**

**[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)**

Health organisation dedicated to eliminating cancer. It aims to do this through research, education and advocacy.

## **Cancer Research UK**

**[www.cancerhelp.org.uk](http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk)**

Contains patient information on all types of cancer and has a clinical trials database.

## **Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland**

**[www.hscni.net](http://www.hscni.net)**

The official gateway to health and social care services in Northern Ireland.

## **Healthtalkonline**

**[www.healthtalkonline.org](http://www.healthtalkonline.org)**

and

**[www.youthhealthtalk.org](http://www.youthhealthtalk.org)**

Both websites contain information about some cancers and have video and audio clips of people talking about their experiences of cancer and its treatments.

## **NHS Choices**

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

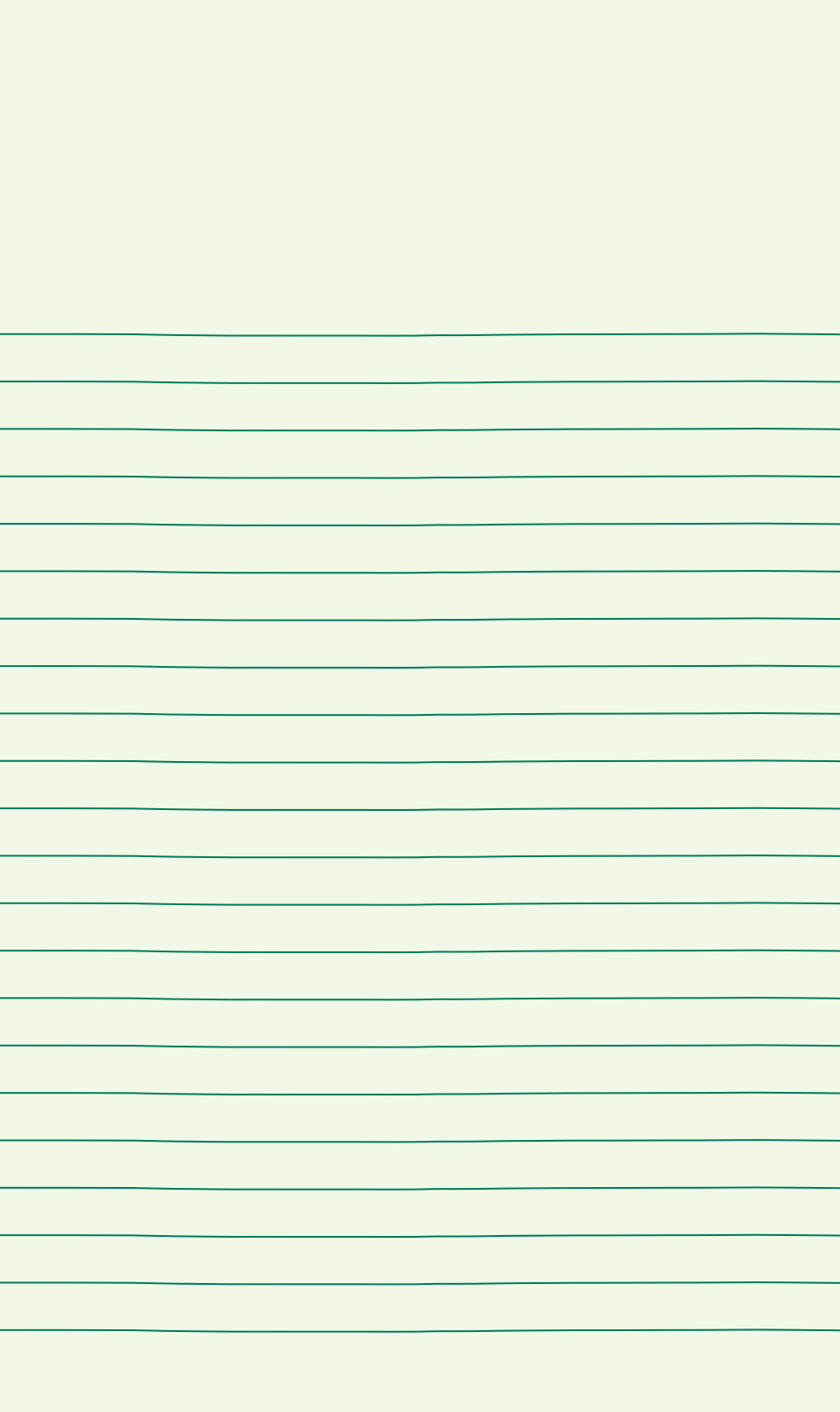
The online 'front door' to the NHS. It's the country's biggest health website and gives all the information you need to make decisions about your health.

## **Patient UK**

**[www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)**

Provides information about health and illnesses.





### 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.

### Thanks

This leaflet has been written, revised and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been approved by our Chief Medical Editor, Tim Iveson, Macmillan Consultant Medical Oncologist.

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### Sources

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The Scottish Government. *An action plan. Section 3 – early detection of cancer 31*. 2008.

The Scottish Government. *Scottish referral guidelines for suspected cancer*. 2013.



More than one in three of us will get cancer. For most of us it will be the toughest fight we ever face. And the feelings of isolation and loneliness that so many people experience make it even harder. But you don't have to go through it alone. The Macmillan team is with you every step of the way.

We are the nurses and therapists helping you through treatment. The experts on the end of the phone. The advisers telling you which benefits you're entitled to. The volunteers giving you a hand with the everyday things. The campaigners improving cancer care. The community there for you online, any time. The supporters who make it all possible. Together, we are all Macmillan Cancer Support.

**For cancer support every step of the way,**

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