



Dr Ian Watson

Ovarian cancer: How pharmacy teams can support the campaign

The NHS is piloting a campaign in the North West of England to raise awareness of persistent bloating as a symptom of ovarian cancer – you can help make it a success.

What is Be Clear on Cancer?

Be Clear on Cancer aims to get more cancers diagnosed at an early stage by raising awareness of key symptoms and encouraging people to discuss them with their doctor without delay.

What is the campaign's key message?

Feeling bloated, most days, for three weeks or more could be a sign of ovarian cancer.

Why focus on persistent bloating?

Focusing on just one key symptom keeps the message simple and direct. A panel of experts and clinicians advised that, of the symptoms highlighted in the [NICE guidelines](#), persistent abdominal distension ('bloating') was the key possible sign of ovarian cancer.

Why does the campaign say 'most days, for three weeks or more'?

When tested with the target audience, women felt the campaign needed to explain what was meant by 'persistent'. They asked for clarity – to know how long they should wait before going to see their GP.

Who is it aimed at?

All women over 50, the age group most at risk of developing ovarian cancer, and their friends and family.

What activities will be taking place and when?

[Adverts](#) will appear on TV, radio and in the press from 10 February until 16 March 2014 across the [North West](#) television region. There will also be [events](#) in public places, like shopping centres.

Is there any evidence that the campaign will work?

Results from local pilot campaigns, which ran from January to March 2013, showed:

- Confidence in knowledge of symptoms of ovarian cancer increased significantly in the Anglia/Essex pilot area after the campaign, up from 20% to 31% of people saying they were 'very/fairly confident'
- 57% of women agreed that 'the advertising told me something new'

More than six in ten women are diagnosed with stage III or IV ovarian cancer, and only around three in 10 women are diagnosed at the earliest stage. Around 500 lives could be saved each year in England if women were diagnosed earlier.

Why do we need to know about the campaign if it prompts women to see their GP?

Pharmacists and their teams have a crucial role to play in this campaign. We know that people delay going to see their GP for a variety of reasons. You can help signpost women who are aged 50 and over, and have the key symptom, to their GP.

You may be aware of women over 50 who repeatedly buy over the counter (OTC) medicines for persistent bloating or ask your advice about this symptom. They could attribute it to getting older or irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) but women rarely have this condition for the first time at this age.

We know that many people like the informal environment of the pharmacy and may be willing to discuss their symptoms or worries more easily in this setting. If appropriate, suggest they get them checked out by their GP.

GPs will be following [NICE guidelines](#), which recommend that women with symptoms of ovarian cancer have diagnostic tests and/or be urgently referred, if appropriate.

Be prepared to take your customer into a consultation room for more privacy or have any sensitive conversations in a way that other customers will not be able to overhear.

'This campaign is a great opportunity to have a more detailed conversation with women about symptoms they might ignore because of their age. Pharmacists and their teams can look out for women over 50 who regularly buy over the counter medicines for persistent bloating. And they can help by directing women they are concerned about to their GP.'

David Barber, Area Team Cancer Pharmacist,
Cheshire Warrington and Wirral Area Team NHS England

Key facts about ovarian cancer

- Just over 5,900 women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer in England each year – around 4,900 (more than 80%) are aged 50 and over
- Around 3,400 women aged 50 and over die from ovarian cancer in England every year
- Over 90% of all women diagnosed with the earliest stage ovarian cancer (stage I) survive for at least five years. This figure is 5% for women diagnosed with the most advanced stage disease (stage IV)

Who is most at risk of developing ovarian cancer?

Women:

- aged over 50 – the risk of developing ovarian cancer increases with age
- who are overweight or obese
- who smoke are at higher risk of developing some types of ovarian cancer
- with a family history of ovarian or breast cancer

What are the symptoms of ovarian cancer?

The public-facing information highlights the following symptoms:

- Bloating, most days, for three weeks or more
- Feeling full quickly or loss of appetite
- Pelvic or stomach pain
- Needing to pee urgently or more frequently than normal
- Changes in bowel habits
- Extreme fatigue (feeling very tired)
- Unexplained weight loss

Starting conversations about cancer can be difficult. Are there any tips?

'Find phrases that you are comfortable with and practise using them,' says a Cancer Research UK nurse. 'For example, if you wanted to talk about cancer as part of a medicine review, mentioning it in the same breath as heart disease, stroke and diabetes may make it easier.'

'If you are worried about someone who has repeatedly bought OTC medicines for persistent bloating, you could ask them "Do you think it might be a good idea to discuss your symptoms with your GP?"'

Assure them they're not wasting anyone's time by getting checked out and, if it's not serious, their mind will be put at rest. Chances are it's nothing to worry about, but it could be something that needs treatment.

Pharmacy staff who feel uncomfortable talking about cancer should seek the advice of their pharmacist.

'Bloating was the main symptom for me but I put it down to getting older. I pointed it out to my sister and she urged me to see a GP. My advice to anyone with persistent bloating is to take yourself straight to the doctor.'

Lou Pescod, aged 65, supporter of Ovarian Cancer Action

How are GPs and hospitals preparing for the campaign?

NHS Improving Quality, part of NHS England, will be working with Strategic Clinical Networks to help ensure the NHS is prepared for this regional campaign. There is an additional briefing sheet for [GPs](#).

Three things you can do to help

1 Make it a part of day-to-day conversations.

Many women you talk to may have seen the campaign and want to discuss it during regular consultations, such as medicine use reviews, or when they buy relevant OTC medicines. You could mention the campaign when you advise women about how to manage associated symptoms.

2 Give permission. Women may not realise their symptoms are serious, worry about wasting their GP's time, or be embarrassed. They might seek your permission to make an appointment. You might see some customers or patients more regularly than their doctor does. Where relevant, encourage women to visit their GP. If you feel comfortable, suggest they mention that their pharmacist or a member of the pharmacy team sent them. It might be the push they need to get themselves checked out.

3 Promote the campaign. You can order free posters and leaflets to display in your pharmacy via orderline.dh.gov.uk or by ringing 0300 123 1002. Chat to customers and colleagues about the campaign – talking may prompt someone to open up about a symptom they didn't think was serious.

Find out more

- **Information and resources for pharmacy teams are available at naedi.org/beclearoncancer/ovarian**
- **The public-facing website for this *Be Clear on Cancer* campaign is nhs.uk/persistentbloating**

