



A summary of key safety netting actions

Safety netting plays an important role in the timely management of suspected cancer. This guide provides a summary of key safety netting actions and patient communication tips to support primary care health professionals in practice.



Key points to communicate to patients

1. How long it will likely take for the patient's symptoms (eg cough, abdominal pain) to resolve.
2. When to contact the GP practice if symptoms worsen or don't resolve in the expected time frame.
3. The specific red flag symptoms or changes to look out for.
4. Who is responsible for following up (eg the patient or primary care professional) and how the patient should contact the GP practice to arrange a follow-up appointment if needed.
5. The reasons for any tests or referrals.
6. The importance of completing and returning tests in a timely manner and attending any follow-up appointments. Signpost our leaflets about urgent cancer referral for support (see below).
7. How and when the patient will receive any results, and what to do if they haven't heard back in that time frame.
8. What an urgent suspected cancer referral involves and what the patient should do if they haven't received an appointment within the expected time frame.
9. The importance of contacting the GP practice if symptoms continue, even after a negative test result.



Actions for primary care professionals

1. Detail the safety netting advice given to the patient in their medical notes.
2. Check the patient understands the safety netting advice (considering language and/or literacy barriers).
3. Offer to give the patient safety netting advice in an email or in writing.
4. If the patient receives a negative test result, make sure they're monitored and followed up with until their symptoms are explained or resolved, or they're referred for further investigations.
5. Consider the accuracy of diagnostic tests when making referral decisions (eg the sensitivity of chest x-rays for lung cancer and of the [Faecal Immunochemical Test](#) for colorectal cancer).
6. Use clinical judgement and consider referral options if the diagnosis remains uncertain after repeated consultations for the same symptom.
7. Code all symptoms, diagnostic tests and referrals, and set up appropriate diary alerts to support timely follow-up.
8. Retain or explicitly hand over responsibility for investigations until results are reviewed and acted on appropriately.



Actions for GP practices

1. Make sure the practice has up-to-date contact details for patients undergoing tests or referrals.
2. Tell patients how to get any test results.
3. Have a system that automatically flags non-respondents in an appropriate time frame and reminds patients to attend appointments or complete tests.
4. Have a system for communicating abnormal test results to patients.
5. Have a system for contacting patients with abnormal test results who fail to attend follow-up appointments.
6. Have a system that documents when all results have been viewed and acted on appropriately.
7. Have policies in place to make sure that tests or investigations ordered by locums are followed up.
8. Have a system that can highlight repeat consultations for unexplained recurrent signs or symptoms.
9. Make sure that practice staff involved in logging results are aware of the reasons for urgent tests and referrals.
10. Conduct learning events with practice staff for patients diagnosed via emergency presentation or for cases with an avoidable primary care delay in diagnosis.
11. Conduct an annual internal practice audit of new cancer diagnoses (eg using the [National Cancer Diagnosis Audit](#) template).



Additional resources



For patients

Urgent referrals explained

You can download or order our leaflets about urgent cancer referral, which support patients to complete investigatory tests or attend follow-up appointments. The leaflets provide patients with useful tips, key questions to ask and a space to write notes. The leaflets are available for patients in:

- England
- Wales (English version)
- Wales (Welsh version)
- Scotland

To download the leaflets, visit cruk.org/urgent-referral-leaflet



For health professionals

Safety netting pathways

Download our safety netting flow chart which illustrates the key steps when managing patients who present with suspected cancer: cruk.org/safetynetting-flowchart.

Clinical decision support tools

Download or order our NICE NG12 symptoms poster, which summarises NICE guidance for suspected cancer: cruk.org/NG12-poster.

Our Scottish Referral Guidelines for Suspected Cancer poster can also support clinical decision-making: cruk.org/SRG-poster.



Find more information at cruk.org/safetynetting

References:

1. [Friedemann Smith et al. BMJ Quality & Safety, 2022.](#)
2. [Jones et al. BJGP, 2019.](#)

**Together we are
beating cancer**