



Linda O'Donnell, cancer survivor

How pharmacy teams can support the first national bowel cancer campaign – Be Clear on Cancer

The Department of Health is launching the first national NHS campaign to raise awareness of the symptoms of bowel cancer and we need your support to help make this campaign a success.

What is Be Clear on Cancer?

Be Clear on Cancer aims to improve early diagnosis of cancer by raising awareness of the key symptoms and making it easier for people to discuss them with their GP. It has already been used to promote early diagnosis of bowel, breast and lung cancer at a local and regional level, and this year the Department of Health has funded local campaigns for breast cancer in women over 70, kidney, bladder and oesophago-gastric cancers too. But this is the first national campaign in England.

What activities will be taking place in your area and when?

Your customers may see the Be Clear on Cancer campaign through TV advertising on channels including ITV and Channel 4. It will also be on the radio, in national press and women's magazines. In addition, there are locally focused activities including advertising on buses and over 150 events. The campaign will run from 30 January to the end of March 2012.

Why is the campaign focusing on bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer is one of the biggest cancer killers and there is significant scope to improve cancer survival rates. Over 90% of bowel cancer patients diagnosed with the earliest stage of disease survive five years compared with less than 7% of those diagnosed with advanced disease.

Who is the campaign aimed at?

The campaign will target men and women from lower socioeconomic groups over the age of 55 and their key influencers, such as friends and family.

What are the key messages of the campaign?

The campaign focuses on having the symptoms 'blood in poo' or 'looser poo' for 3 or more weeks. There are other symptoms, but these are the most common in those diagnosed with bowel cancer. The campaign encourages people with the key symptoms not to delay and to go and see their GP.

Why do you need to know about the campaign if the advertising prompts the public 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. They may be embarrassed, or may not realise their symptoms are serious; they may worry about wasting the GP's time; or if they suspect cancer, they may fear the diagnosis and treatment. However, they might visit their local pharmacy to ask for advice if they are worried about their symptoms or to purchase an over the counter (OTC) medicine. We know that many people like the informal environment of the pharmacy and may be willing to discuss their symptoms/worries more easily in this setting.

You'll be aware of people who have repeatedly purchased OTC medicines connected to the key symptoms of blood in poo or looser poo. If the symptoms have lasted for three weeks or more this is an ideal opportunity to suggest a visit to their GP.

'...I never thought it could happen to me. My symptoms included loose poo, occasional bleeding and some lower abdominal pain.'
Linda O'Donnell, aged 60

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More about bowel cancer

- In England, around 33,000 people are diagnosed with bowel cancer each year and around 13,000 people die from the disease
- It is estimated that 1,700 deaths could be avoided each year if bowel cancer survival rates were as good as the best in Europe

‘This is the first campaign of its type to be run in England and it’s a great opportunity for us as health professionals to really support our communities. We can help our customers to overcome some of the barriers to presenting early with suspected cancer symptoms. As pharmacists and pharmacy staff, we can provide reassurance, signpost our customers to their GPs and keep a look out for those customers most at risk.’

Ann Gunning, MRPharmS

Who is most at risk of bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer affects both men and women but is more common in older age, with around 91% of people diagnosed aged over 55. Risk factors include diet (eating too much red or processed meat and too little fruit and vegetables), being overweight or obese, low levels of physical activity, drinking alcohol and smoking. Those with a family history of bowel cancer are also more at risk.

Opening cancer conversations with customers can be difficult, are there any tips?

We know that as a pharmacist or a member of the pharmacy team you will be comfortable talking about a customer’s medicines and general health. However, mentioning the word cancer can prove challenging. Pharmacy staff who may feel uncomfortable talking about cancer should seek the advice of a pharmacist. A Cancer Research UK cancer nurse, who specialises in communicating about cancer, advises: ‘It is important for pharmacists to feel confident and to try and normalise cancer. Practise and find phrases that you are comfortable with. For example if you wanted to mention cancer as part of a 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 medicine for a suspected cancer symptom, why not ask them – “what does the doctor say about that?” or “do you think it might be a good idea to discuss your symptoms with your GP?”’

How are GPs and hospitals preparing for the campaign?

The Department of Health has written to all GPs and Trusts about the plans for the campaign. There are additional resources available for GPs and ongoing work to help hospital providers plan for expected increases in referrals.

What about screening?

Screening is an incredibly important part of diagnosing bowel cancer early and it is referenced in the campaign leaflet. However, Be Clear on Cancer is targeting symptomatic patients so it is not mentioned in the TV advert or posters – we want to keep the message simple and direct.

Three things you can do:

- 1 Make it part of your day.** During your regular consultations, such as medicine use reviews, or in all conversations, be mindful that the people you are talking to may have seen the campaign and want to talk about it. It may prompt people who have previously ignored their symptoms to do something – they may come to your pharmacy looking for OTC medicine or advice.
- 2 Give permission.** We know our target audience often delay going to see their GP and often seek permission to make an appointment. Where relevant, encourage customers/patients to visit their GP. If you feel comfortable, tell the customer to mention that their pharmacist sent them. It may be the push they need to get themselves checked out.
- 3 Promote the campaign.** Put up posters in your pharmacy and have some campaign leaflets readily available for customers. You can order these at www.orderline.dh.gov.uk. Finally, chat to your friends, family, customers and colleagues about Be Clear on Cancer. We need to talk about cancer and make it a less taboo topic.

Find out more about Be Clear on Cancer

- Visit the website for health professionals to find out more about Be Clear on Cancer
- For support in raising the subject of cancer with patients visit the British Oncology Pharmacy Association’s learning centre
- The public-facing website for Be Clear on Cancer is www.nhs.uk/bowelcancer

