Ovarian cancer: How GPs can help with the campaign

The NHS is piloting a regional campaign in the North West to raise awareness of persistent bloating as a symptom of ovarian cancer. Around 500 lives could be saved in England each year if women were diagnosed earlier.

What is Be Clear on Cancer?
Be Clear on Cancer aims to improve early diagnosis of cancer by raising awareness of symptoms and encouraging people to see their GP 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.

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

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’?
It is essential to highlight the importance of persistence and frequency of bloating. When the message was tested with the target audience (and GPs) women felt the campaign needed to clearly explain how long they should wait before going to see their GP.

Be Clear on Cancer uses everyday language, so the description in the NICE guidelines (‘more than 12 times per month’) was reworded to reflect how women describe persistent ‘bloating’. Continue to use your clinical judgment when women come to see you with symptoms of bloating to determine whether it is persistent abdominal distension.

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.

Why run a regional pilot of this campaign?
More than six in ten women are diagnosed with stage III or IV ovarian cancer, and only around three in ten women are diagnosed at the earliest stage. 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’

The approval of CA125 as a diagnostic test for ovarian cancer within primary care and direct access to non-obstructive ultrasound has made diagnosing and excluding ovarian cancer simpler for GPs, adding to the timeliness of this campaign.

What impact will this regional campaign have on my practice?
You may see more women coming to your practice with the symptom of persistent bloating, but it is anticipated that this will be manageable. Analysis of GP attendance data during the local pilots in early 2013 showed a 22% increase. This equates to 0.04 additional patients, per practice, per week.

naedi.org/beclearoncancer/ovarian

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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
- An average of 28 cases of ovarian cancer are diagnosed in each clinical commissioning group (CCG) per year. This equates to around two cases of ovarian cancer in each CCG per month
- More than 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)

‘It’s great that this Be Clear on Cancer campaign is raising awareness of ovarian cancer – this will make a difference to patients’ chances of having successful treatment and their overall experience. Women often experience a complicated pattern of symptoms that can be difficult to identify. The campaign will boost their confidence, making them feel more comfortable talking to their doctor. I’d strongly encourage local GPs to be prepared for the campaign, remind themselves of the updated NICE guidelines and to make use of the range of diagnostic tests available to them.’
Dr Anant Sachdev, GP from Berkshire

Reminders
You might find it helpful to keep these reminders about signs and symptoms and referrals easily accessible throughout the campaign.

Ovarian cancer symptoms
NICE guidelines highlight the following symptoms on a ‘persistent or frequent basis’:
- persistent abdominal distension (‘bloating’)
- feeling full (early satiety) and/or loss of appetite
- pelvic or abdominal pain
- increased urge to urinate and/or frequency

Assessment and referral
There is information to support you with the diagnosis of cancer. If physical examination identifies ascites and/or a pelvic or abdominal mass (which is not obviously uterine fibroids) you can refer urgently under the two-week wait referral system.

If a patient presents with any of the symptoms listed above, the NICE guidelines recommend carrying out diagnostic tests, including measuring serum CA125 in primary care and arranging an ultrasound scan of the abdomen and pelvis, as appropriate. They also suggest considering carrying out tests in primary care if a woman reports unexplained weight loss, fatigue or changes in bowel habits.

The full version of the NICE guidelines also includes an algorithm covering ‘Detection in primary care’ that you may find useful.

Remember, women may use the term ‘bloating’ to describe both up and down swelling of the abdomen, and abdominal distension. Ask women to explain their bloating in more detail and continue to use your clinical judgement to discern those who are at higher risk and warrant investigation.

What about the impact on secondary care?
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. Trusts have been informed about the campaign and advised to plan for anticipated increases in referrals, diagnostic tests and treatment.

Three things you can do to help

1 Talk about ovarian cancer symptoms. This campaign may prompt women who’ve previously ignored persistent abdominal distension to come and see you. They may worry they’re wasting your time, be afraid of what you might discover or find it difficult to communicate their symptoms. Remind female patients of the key signs and symptoms to look out for and reassure them that they wouldn’t be wasting your time to get them checked out.

2 Make the most of available support. Useful resources include:
- NICE guidelines specifically for ovarian cancer;
- NICE accredited online learning tool, ‘Recognising early symptoms of ovarian cancer’;
- Tools for GPs: ‘Improving Diagnosis of Cancer’ and ‘Direct access to diagnostic tests for cancer: best practice referral pathways for general practitioners’;
- Cancer decision support tools, including an ovarian cancer risk assessment tool (RAT) and QCancer;
- Take a look at ovarian cancer statistics for your area, and compare them with other places in England, using Gynaecological Cancer Profiles;
- The NHS and local authorities are being encouraged to work together to plan for this campaign. Your CCG may have a GP cancer lead who can give you further information relating to your local area.

3 Encourage your colleagues to support the campaign. Practice nurses, receptionists and practice managers all have an important role to play in this campaign. There are separate briefing sheets for nurses and practice managers. Ensure everyone is briefed, so they can support it.

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