In early 2014, a new national NHS campaign will be raising awareness of breast cancer symptoms in women aged 70 and over. Your support is vital.

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 earlier.

What is the main message of this campaign?
1 in 3 women who get breast cancer are over 70, so don’t assume you’re past it. The campaign also emphasises that a lump is not the only sign of breast cancer and women over 70 should tell their GP if they notice any changes in their breasts.

What activities will be taking place and when?
Adverts will appear on daytime TV across England from 3 February to 16 March 2014. A direct mail letter and leaflet will also be sent to a representative sample of women aged 70 and over in key areas.

In addition to women aged 70 and over, the campaign is aimed at their key influencers, such as friends and family.

Why focus on breast cancer in women over 70?
Breast cancer survival is lower in women aged over 70 than in younger women. Research shows that older women have low knowledge of non-lump breast cancer symptoms and are more likely to delay presenting to their GP with breast cancer. They might be embarrassed, afraid of treatment, unaware that they are more likely to develop breast cancer or dismissive of symptoms as a sign of ageing. NICE guidelines state that ‘primary healthcare professionals should encourage all patients, including women over 50 years old, to be breast aware in order to minimise delay in the presentation of symptoms’. We need to make sure women know that breast cancer risk increases with age and how important it is to talk to their GP about any unusual changes – diagnosing breast cancer early means treatment is more likely to be successful.

Is there any evidence that the campaign will work?
Local pilots in 2012 showed encouraging results:
• 8% increase in 2 Week Wait (2WW) referrals for both non-suspected breast cancer symptoms and suspected breast cancer in women over 70 in the pilot area compared with 5% increase in the control area
• 4% increase in the number of breast cancers diagnosed following a 2WW referral for non-suspected breast cancer symptoms in women over 70 in the pilot area compared with a 2% increase in the control area

Results from the regional pilot in January to March 2013 have also been positive:
• Belief that one in three women who get breast cancer are aged over 70 increased significantly after the campaign from 16% to 25%
• For women aged 70–79 there was a 13% increase in referrals for suspected breast cancer symptoms within the regional pilot campaign area

We are working to assess the impact of the campaigns on screening.

What to expect during this national campaign
The initial results from a regional pilot in the Midlands TV region suggest that you may see more patients coming to your practice with breast cancer symptoms or mentioning them during home visits. It’s difficult to predict the exact impact, but based on the experience of local and regional pilot campaigns, any increase should be manageable. The national bowel cancer campaign in January–March 2012 focussed on a larger target audience and the number of visits equated to approximately one extra patient with relevant symptoms per practice every two weeks.

naedi.org/beclearoncancer/breastover70
Breast cancer reminders
You might find it helpful to keep these reminders easily accessible throughout the national Be Clear on Cancer campaign.

Breast cancer symptoms
The public-facing information highlights a range of symptoms:
• A lump in the breast or armpit
• Nipple changes
• Changes to the skin of the breast
• Changes in the shape or size of the breast
• Pain in the breast or armpit

But also explains that women over 70 should tell their GP if they notice any changes in their breasts.

A detailed list of signs and symptoms that should be referred for assessment is available for GPs.

‘We all want our patients to feel comfortable and confide in us, and this campaign gives us the opportunity to open conversations about breast cancer with women who might otherwise avoid the issue. Many of my older patients are surprised to hear that breast cancer risk increases with age and don’t realise breast symptoms might be something serious. It’s important to remind them: no matter how old you are, continue to check your breasts regularly and tell me if you notice any changes.’

Dr Kiran Singh, GP from Warwickshire

Screening
This campaign focuses on symptomatic cancer, but it is also an ideal opportunity to remind any patients aged 70 or over that they are still entitled to NHS breast screening – they just need to make their own appointment. A new leaflet is available for women, giving information about the possible benefits and risks to allow them to make an informed and personal choice about whether to have breast screening. If women would like to have breast screening, details of their nearest NHS breast screening unit are available on the NHS Cancer Screening Programmes website or by entering their post code or town on the NHS Choices website. Some women may appreciate support in booking an appointment.

Remember, if a patient presents with symptoms, it’s reasonable to make an urgent 2 Week Wait referral in accordance with NICE guidelines, even if they have recently been screened or are waiting for an appointment to be screened.

More than 90% of all women diagnosed with the earliest stage breast cancer (stage I) survive their disease for at least five years. This figure is around 15% for women diagnosed with the most advanced stage of the disease (stage IV)

Assessment and referral
If a patient presents with any signs or symptoms suggestive of breast cancer, NICE guidelines recommend that they should be referred to a team specialising in the management of breast cancer for assessment. In these cases, investigation prior to referral is not recommended.

What about the impact on secondary care?
NHS Improving Quality, as part of NHS England, will work with Strategic Clinical Networks to help ensure the NHS is prepared for the breast cancer in women over 70 campaign. Trusts have been informed about the campaign and there is an additional briefing sheet to support hospital providers.

Three things you can do
1 Talk about breast cancer risk and symptoms. The campaign may prompt women who have previously ignored symptoms to tell you about them. But they may be afraid, embarrassed or not find it easy to communicate their symptoms. When you see any of your female patients aged 70 or over, remind them of the key signs and symptoms to look out for and the importance of regularly checking their breasts. Some patients may need help to be breast aware and carers should be encouraged to alert you if they notice any unusual changes.

2 Make the most of available support. There’s lots of information to support you with this early diagnosis activity, including:
   • NICE referral guidelines
   • ‘Best Practice Diagnostic Guidelines for Patients Presenting with Breast Symptoms’
   • BMJ Learning online education tools – ‘Suspected breast cancer: when you should refer’ and ‘Tackling late diagnosis of cancer’
   • The NHS and local authorities are being encouraged to work together to plan for and support this campaign. Your CCG may have a GP cancer lead who can give you further information relating to your 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. A patient may confide in a practice nurse or another member of the team as part of another health check or because they are worried about wasting their GP’s time. There’s a separate briefing sheet for nurses and for practice managers. Ensure they are briefed, so they can support the campaign.

Find out more
• Visit naedi.org/beclearoncancer for more campaign information and resources
• The public-facing website for the campaign is nhs.uk/breastcancer70

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