The NHS is piloting a 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.

**Why focus on persistent ‘bloating’?**

Focusing on just one important 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 this message was tested with the target audience, 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 abdominal distension or ‘bloating’.

**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 the campaign will work?**

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

- Confidence in people’s knowledge of the 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’ of them
- 57% of women agreed that ‘the advertising told me something new’

**What role do nurses have in supporting the campaign?**

Nurses are crucial to the success of the campaign. People can delay going to see their GP for a variety of reasons, including not thinking their symptoms are serious. Women may be more willing to open up to you. You can reassure them that it’s okay to get symptoms checked out.

As part of your day-to-day work, look out for patients who could be most at risk. Make the most of timely and appropriate opportunities to mention the campaign. This might be during women-only specialist clinics, NHS health checks or as part of cervical screening appointments with women aged 50 and over, when you’ll be discussing gynaecological issues anyway.

If you treat women for long term conditions, you’re in an ideal position to ask patients if they have noticed any unexplained symptoms or are concerned about anything else.

[naedi.org/beclearoncancer/ovarian](http://naedi.org/beclearoncancer/ovarian)
Some women don’t realise that persistent bloating may need checking out, so might only mention it along with other symptoms or when they’re talking about something else. It’s good to keep an ear out for it or to use the campaign to introduce the topic yourself. I’ll do this when I’m talking with women about other gynaecological or lifestyle issues. To check that it’s the kind of bloating that might be cause for concern, rather than after they eat or something, I might say: ‘What do you mean by bloating?’ and then encourage anyone I’m worried about to make an appointment with their GP.

Catherine Silcock, Lead Cancer Nurse, Lancashire

Key facts about ovarian cancer
- Around 5,900 women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer in England each year – around 4,900 of whom (more than 80%) are aged 50 and over
- 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
- 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

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

If a physical examination identifies ascites and/or a pelvic or abdominal mass (which is not obviously uterine fibroids), GPs can refer urgently under the two-week wait referral system.

Remember, women may use the term ‘bloating’ to describe both swelling of the abdomen that comes and goes, 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.

‘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

If any of your patients come to see you with possible symptoms, or if you have concerns, urge them to make an appointment with the GP. Assure them they’re not wasting anyone’s time by getting checked out – the chances are it’s nothing to worry about, but it could be something that needs treatment.

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 are additional briefing sheets for GPs and for hospital providers.

Three things you can do
1 Talk about ovarian cancer symptoms. The campaign may encourage people who have ignored symptoms to talk to you. But they may be afraid, not find it easy to communicate their symptoms, or worry they’re wasting your time. Use the campaign to talk about any symptoms with women over 50 who don’t approach you first, for example as part of cervical screening appointments. Or if they come to see you about something else, ask if they have any other concerns. If you’re caring for patients in the community, take campaign leaflets with you to use as a prompt.

2 Give permission. Our target audience can delay going to see their GP and often seek permission to make an appointment. If someone mentions feeling bloated a lot of the time, ask questions to find out more about the nature of their symptoms and, where relevant, encourage patients to visit their doctor – if they need extra reassurance, they could mention that ‘the nurse sent them’. It may be the push they need to get themselves checked out. Suggest they see their GP again if their symptom doesn’t go away.

3 Encourage your colleagues to support this regional pilot campaign. Everyone has an important role to play. Suggest people you work with check out the adverts on NHS Choices and make sure they know that briefing sheets are available. Brief health care assistants about the campaign so they can bear it in mind in their day-to-day work too.

Find out more
- Visit naedi.org/beclearoncancer/ovarian for more information for health professionals
- The public-facing website for the Be Clear on Cancer campaign is nhs.uk/persistentbloating