The NHS is piloting a campaign in the North West of England to raise awareness of persistent bloating as a symptom of ovarian cancer. Around 500 lives could be saved each year in England 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?
The message for women is: Feeling bloated, most days, for three weeks or more could be a sign of ovarian cancer.

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’?
When tested with the target audience, women felt the campaign needed to explain what was meant by ‘persistent’. They asked for clarity – to know how long they should wait before going to see their GP.

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.

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 should 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.

NICE guidelines recommend that women with symptoms of ovarian cancer have diagnostic tests and/or be urgently referred if appropriate. Prepare for more assessments and referrals and, as a result, more women ringing up asking for test results.

The campaign may prompt women to discuss symptoms with your practice nurse as part of other appointments or visits to clinics. So, as well as GPs, nurses need to be aware of the key messages.

Three things you can do

1 Brief colleagues
2 Plan for increased activity
3 Promote the campaign

naedi.org/beclearoncancer/ovarian
Our practice was part of a local Be Clear on Cancer campaign. More people came through our doors, not a huge amount, but because we’d planned well, it was manageable. It’s important to brief the whole practice on the campaign, including clinical colleagues, nurses and receptionists. Be prepared for an increase in demand for appointments, and calls regarding test results. I think it is important to realise that awareness can be raised by opportunistically talking to women in the target age group about the campaign when they attend surgery for any reason.

Liz Kerr, Practice Manager, Berkshire

Ovarian cancer symptoms

The public-facing information highlights the following symptoms:

• Bloating, most days, for three weeks or more
• Feeling full quickly or loss of appetite
• Pelvic or stomach pain
• Needing to pee urgently or more frequently than normal
• Changes in bowel habits
• Extreme fatigue (feeling very tired)
• Unexplained weight loss

Is there any evidence the campaign will work?

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’

Why does the campaign need our support?

For ovarian cancer, more than six in ten women are diagnosed with stage 3 or 4 disease, and only around three in ten women are diagnosed at the earliest stage.

That’s why we need to encourage women who have persistent bloating to recognise that they should visit their GP without delay. To make this campaign a success, we need you and your colleagues to be aware of it and to talk about it with patients.

How can we order campaign materials?

You can order free posters and leaflets from the via orderline.dh.gov.uk or by calling 0300 123 1002.

Three things you can do to help

1 Brief colleagues. The whole practice team needs to be aware of this campaign, so they can support it. Brief practice nurses and GPs on the key messages – there are briefing sheets for both. Tell your patient participation groups too. Encourage everyone to check out the campaign on NHS Choices.

2 Plan for increased activity. Be prepared for women who have the symptom of persistent bloating wanting appointments. But remind your team that they need to be mindful that women may feel that they’re wasting their GP’s time. Plan for an increase in the number of women sent for diagnostic tests and referred via the urgent 2 Week Wait referral system.

3 Promote the campaign. Display posters and leaflets and encourage colleagues to talk about the ovarian cancer campaign. Timely and appropriate opportunities for them to mention the campaign include during women-only specialist clinics and as part of cervical screening appointments with women aged 50 and over. It is often face-to-face discussion that changes behaviour. Talking might prompt someone to make an appointment or open up about their symptoms.

Find out more

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

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 1) survive for at least five years. This figure is 5% for women diagnosed with the most advanced stage disease (stage 4)