Bowel cancer: How you can raise awareness in your community

We need the support of volunteers, champions and groups to reach local communities.

What is Be Clear on Cancer?
When cancer is picked up early, treatment is more likely to be successful – this is why the Department of Health has launched Be Clear on Cancer. The aim is to get more cancers diagnosed at an early stage by raising awareness of the key symptoms and encouraging more people to discuss them with their doctor earlier.

Bowel cancer adverts have appeared on national TV, radio and in the press. The campaign has also been used in local communities to highlight the importance of spotting other cancers early, such as breast, lung, kidney and bladder cancers.

Why does this campaign focus on bowel cancer?
Bowel cancer is one of the biggest cancer killers. Over 93% of bowel cancer patients survive for at least five years when the disease is caught at the earliest stage compared with 7% of those diagnosed at an advanced stage.

What is the main message of the campaign?
The campaign has a clear message: *tell your doctor if you've had blood in your poo or looser poo for three weeks or more.*

What activities will be taking place and when?
The first national campaign that ran from January to March 2012 increased the public’s awareness of blood in poo and looser poo as symptoms of bowel cancer, but we want to keep the main messages at the front of people’s minds. A ‘reminder’ campaign will run on TV and radio from 28 August until the end of September.

Three areas of England will also pilot different approaches to keep the campaign running until mid-March 2013.

Who is the campaign aimed at?
Bowel cancer is more common as people get older – around 90% of those diagnosed are over 55, so the campaign is aimed at men and women in this age group. We know that people in some areas or communities are more likely to put off going to see their doctor even when they have symptoms. So, the campaign is also aimed at friends and family who can pass on information and encourage loved ones to make an appointment if they’re worried.

How can you help people in your community?
You have a vital role to play. We know that people often take notice of advice from friends and family, and people they trust, when deciding if symptoms are serious enough to see their doctor. You know your local community and can help people around you understand the main messages.

People put off going to see their doctor for lots of different reasons. They might be embarrassed, not realise their symptoms are serious or worry about wasting the doctor’s time. If they think it could be cancer, people are often frightened of finding out or are scared of treatment. By talking in a comfortable and familiar setting, you can help people overcome their fears and encourage them to speak to a health professional.

Supported by

www.nhs.uk/bowelcancer
You don’t need a medical background or to give medical advice. You can:

• Explain that it’s best to get symptoms checked out – it might not be anything serious, but if it is, finding out sooner can make a real difference.
• Reassure them that the doctor or nurse has heard it all before, so there’s no need to feel embarrassed.
• Some people might welcome support to make an appointment – once it’s booked, encourage them to take someone with them. If it’s appropriate, you could offer to go with them yourself.
• Help people feel more confident about speaking to their doctor by offering to run through what they will say during the appointment. Underline the symptoms they have been experiencing on the Be Clear on Cancer leaflet and encourage them to take it with them to their doctor. They may find it useful to make a note of how often the symptoms have occurred and how they feel, so they can clearly explain why they are worried.
• If someone has seen their doctor already, but their symptoms haven’t gone away, have changed, or got worse, reassure them that their doctor will want to know. Explain that it’s important they go back and see their doctor again.
• Suggest people come and tell you how they got on. This opens the door for you to give them another nudge if they haven’t been to get themselves checked out by the next time you see them.
• If people are over 60 and don’t have symptoms, explain that it’s really important to use the screening kit when it arrives in the post. It can help detect bowel cancer early, before any symptoms appear. They can do the test at home and samples are sent to a lab.

Find phrases that you are comfortable with and practise using them. You could start by talking about the campaign and asking people if they saw it on TV. If you are concerned about someone or they mention a symptom that they’re worried about, why not ask them – “Do you think it might be a good idea to discuss your symptoms with your doctor?”

Three things you can do:

1 Promote the campaign. Put up posters in your local area and have leaflets handy to give to people and help you explain the campaign. If you would like more information about Be Clear on Cancer activities in your area, try contacting your local Cancer Network through www.ncat.nhs.uk

2 Make it part of your day-to-day conversations. Talking may prompt someone to make an appointment or open up about a symptom they’ve been hiding or didn’t think was serious. You’ll be helping to make cancer less of a taboo topic.

3 Encourage people to see their doctor. We know that often people just need a nudge from family, friends and those around them to persuade them to go to their doctor if they’re worried about possible symptoms.

Find out more

• Order free posters and leaflets from the Department of Health: www.orderline.dh.gov.uk
• Direct members of the public to the NHS Choices website to find out more about the campaign and bowel cancer: www.nhs.uk/bowelcancer
• If you work for a community or voluntary sector organisation, for more information about the campaign and additional materials, visit: www.naedi.org/beclearoncancer/bowel

Talking about cancer can be difficult. Do you have any tips?

A Cancer Research UK nurse, who specialises in communicating about cancer, advises: ‘It is important to feel confident and to try to make cancer a normal part of conversation.

‘The message definitely gets through better when it comes from someone you know and trust – when you meet with people one-on-one they open up to you more.’

Community champion