

## CANCER BRIEFING

---

### CAUSES OF CANCER AND CONTRIBUTING RISK FACTORS

---

Cancer is caused when dividing cells in the body grow abnormally and have the ability to invade and spread to other parts of the body. There are about 200 different types of cancers, some more common than others. There are many factors involved in developing cancer and not just one thing. These various factors can be summarised under three broad categories:

---

#### LIFESTYLE, WHICH CAN BE CHANGED

---

Many cancers are linked to our lifestyles and the risk of getting a cancer can be reduced if a healthy lifestyle is adopted. Positive lifestyle choices which reduce the risk are not smoking, maintaining a healthy weight, taking plenty of exercise, not drinking too much alcohol, eating plenty of vegetables, fruits and whole grains, being vaccinated against certain infectious diseases, not eating too much red meat, and avoiding too much exposure to sunlight.

---

#### BIOLOGICAL FACTORS, WHICH CANNOT BE CHANGED, SUCH AS GENES AND AGEING

---

Most types of cancers become more common as we age. This is because the changes that make a cell become cancerous in the first place take a long time to develop. There have to be a number of changes to the genes within a cell before it turns into a cancer cell. The longer we live, the more time there is for genetic mistakes to happen in our cells.

Sometimes a person is born with one of these mutations already. This doesn't mean you will definitely get cancer. But with one mutation from the start, it makes it more likely statistically that cancer will develop during your lifetime. Doctors call this "genetic predisposition".

---

#### ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS, SOME OF WHICH CAN BE CHANGED

---

Environmental factors mean what is around us each day that may cause cancer. This can include:

- Tobacco smoke
- The sun
- Natural and manmade radiation
- Work place hazards
- Asbestos

Some of these are avoidable and some are not. Most are only contributing factors to causing cancers – part of the jigsaw puzzle that scientists are still trying to put together.

Viruses are implicated in causing some cancers. But this does not mean that these cancers can be caught like an infection. The virus can cause genetic changes in cells that make them more likely to become cancerous. For example, cervical cancer is linked with the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV).

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO IMPROVE YOUR LIFESTYLE AND REDUCE YOUR RISKS OF CANCER

---

Leading a healthy lifestyle can reduce your risk of developing cancer and other diseases. Here are some practical steps you can take.

### **Assess your current health**

You can do this yourself. You could start by visiting [www.nhs.uk/lifecheck](http://www.nhs.uk/lifecheck)

Some more specific self-assessments can be found for:

- 1) Alcohol: [www.nhs.uk/Tools/Pages/Alcoholcalculator.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Tools/Pages/Alcoholcalculator.aspx)
- 2) Healthy eating assessment tool: [www.nhs.uk/Tools/Pages/HealthyEating.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Tools/Pages/HealthyEating.aspx)
- 3) Fruit and veg, what counts: [www.nhs.uk/Livewell/5ADAY/Pages/Whatcounts.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/5ADAY/Pages/Whatcounts.aspx)
- 4) Stop smoking:  
[http://www.royalwolverhamptonhospitals.nhs.uk/city\\_community\\_services/healthy\\_city/healthy\\_lifestyles.aspx](http://www.royalwolverhamptonhospitals.nhs.uk/city_community_services/healthy_city/healthy_lifestyles.aspx)  
<http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/smoking/Pages/stopsmokingnewhome.aspx>  
<https://nosmokingday.org.uk/> 11<sup>th</sup> March 2015  
<https://quitnow.smokefree.nhs.uk/>

If you want to be more thorough, you can have a NHS health check. This covers your height and weight measurement (to give your BMI), blood pressure and blood sugar. They will also ask about your lifestyle and give you some practical advice on how to make changes. These are part of the NHS and are free between the ages of 40 to 74. In Wolverhampton, health checks are also available to young people aged 16 to 39. Click below to see what a NHS health check covers.

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/nhs-health-check/pages/what-is-an-nhs-health-check.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/nhs-health-check/pages/what-is-an-nhs-health-check.aspx)

You can make an appointment through the Healthy Lifestyles Team on 01902 444246 / 0800 073 4242 or by e-mail to [rwh-tr.Healthy-Lifestyles@nhs.net](mailto:rwh-tr.Healthy-Lifestyles@nhs.net). Your GP Practice is also able to offer checks, so you can try calling them to make an appointment.

**Take plenty of exercise:**

The UK guidelines for physical activity are:

- Early years (under five years): After beginning to walk, under-fives should be physically active for at least 180 minutes (3 hours) a **day**;
- Children and young people (5 - 18 years): At least 60 minutes (1 hour) of moderate to vigorous physical activity per **day**.
- Adults should **aim to do at least 2 1/2 hours of moderate activity every week** - but you can break that down into smaller chunks if that makes it easier for you to stick to. For example, try doing half an hour a day, five days a week. Even 10 minutes at a time can count, and the more active you are, the more benefit you can get.

There's no need to join a gym or train for a marathon, unless you want to. Moderate activity includes anything that gets you a little bit warm and out of breath. Brisk walking, gardening, dancing and even housework are all great ways to be more active. It's good to think about how to put more exercise into your daily routine.

Making small changes, like taking the stairs instead of the lift or making short journeys on foot can really help you increase how active you are. And it's never too late to start making a difference. Even if you've been inactive for years, becoming more active now can improve your health and reduce the risk of cancer.<sup>1</sup>

For more tips and local information, visit [www.wolverhampton.gov.uk/Wolvestotal](http://www.wolverhampton.gov.uk/Wolvestotal) or contact the community development team [community.development@wolverhampton.gov.uk](mailto:community.development@wolverhampton.gov.uk)

**Quit smoking:** There's local help and national efforts to join in with. You can make an appointment through the Healthy Lifestyles Team on 01902 444246 / 0800 073 4242 or by e-mail to: [rwh-tr.Healthy-Lifestyles@nhs.net](mailto:rwh-tr.Healthy-Lifestyles@nhs.net).

The Healthy Lifestyles service offers a range of smoking cessation options which include: 1:1 or group support with advice on Nicotine Replacement Therapy. There are a number of drop in and workplace sessions across the City available as well as support from some GPs and pharmacies. Further detail can be found by using the contact details above.

**Know your drinking limits:** it can be tricky knowing what the recommended drinking limits are as they are different for men and women and the amount of alcohol in a drink varies i.e. some wines and beers are stronger than others. Try the alcohol assessment tool mentioned above: below are some tips to help you be more aware of your alcohol consumption and make changes:

- Push back the time before your first drink, preferably until you eat.
- If you're drinking at home with friends or family, have a non-alcoholic drink in between alcoholic ones, such as sharing a pot of tea or a glass of water
- Choose lower alcohol drinks or even go alcohol-free, some lagers still taste good.
- Don't be tempted by bulk offers, they may be cheaper, but they'll tempt you from the cupboard at home!

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.cancerresearchuk.org/cancer-info/healthyliving/exerciseandactivity/physical-activity-exercise-and-cancer](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/cancer-info/healthyliving/exerciseandactivity/physical-activity-exercise-and-cancer)

- Set yourself a limit before you start drinking, either in terms of amount or money and stick to it.
- Try to have at least 2 alcohol free days a week, preferably one after the other.
- Keep a diary of your drinking habits over a week/month, ie how much you drink, where and with who, to give you realistic picture. From this, you might be able to plan how to cut down.

---

## SCREENING FOR CANCERS

---

Some cancers can be detected through the NHS's screening programmes: most commonly known about are Cervical and Breast Screening Programmes.

### **Cervical screening**

Also known as a smear or PAP test, it can detect changes in the cells of the cervix. Almost all cervical cancers are caused by Human Papillomavirus (HPV) infection. HPV infection is very common but progresses to cervical cancer in a minority of cases. Risk increases with increases in HPV exposure and persistent in HPV infection.

There is a HPV vaccination programme for pupils aged 12 -13 in Year 8 at school delivered by school nursing. Delaying the age of becoming sexually active and use of condoms can reduce the risk of infection.

Attending NHS cervical screening appointments are a vital way to assess and monitor the health of your cervix. If you are not up to date or you're not sure, call your GP Practice for an appointment with the Practice Nurse.

### **Breast screening (mammograms)**

A mammogram is an x-ray picture of the breast and can be used to check for breast cancer when you do not have any signs or symptoms of the disease. Women are currently invited between the ages of 50-70, but due to new techniques the age is being lowered to 47-49 and increased from 71-72. These changes will be in place by 2016. It is very important to go for your mammogram when invited by the central screening service as it can detect changes to breast tissue before you can feel any changes.

---

## KEY SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF CANCERS

---

Not all cancers can be screened for, so it is important you are aware of some common signs and symptoms associated with cancers. Knowing your body and changes to look for could make a real difference. If you do develop one of the symptoms, it does not definitely mean you have got a cancer- usually it's far less serious. However, it is important you get it checked out as soon as possible by making an appointment with your GP. The earlier cancer is found, the more likely it is that treatment will be successful.

## SIGNS OF CANCER FOR MEN AND WOMEN:

---

- An unusual lump or swelling anywhere on your body
- Changes on your skin or in the size, shape or colour of a mole (such as itching, bleeding)
- A sore that won't heal after several weeks
- A mouth or tongue ulcer that lasts longer than three weeks
- A cough or croaky voice that lasts longer than three weeks
- Persistent difficulty swallowing or indigestion
- Problems passing urine
- Blood in your urine
- Blood in your bowel motions
- A change to more frequent bowel motions that lasts longer than four to six weeks
- Unexplained weight loss or heavy night sweats
- An unexplained pain or ache that lasts longer than four weeks
- Breathlessness
- Coughing up blood

## SIGNS OF CANCER FOR WOMEN:

---

- An unusual breast change
- Bleeding from the vagina after the menopause or between periods
- Persistent bloating

### **More information can be found at:**

[www.cancerresearchuk.org/cancer-info/spotcancerearly/key-signs-and-symptoms/key-signs-and-symptoms](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/cancer-info/spotcancerearly/key-signs-and-symptoms/key-signs-and-symptoms)

[www.cancerresearchuk.org/cancer-info/healthyliving/exerciseandactivity/physical-activity-exercise-and-cancer](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/cancer-info/healthyliving/exerciseandactivity/physical-activity-exercise-and-cancer)

[www.macmillan.org.uk/Cancerinformation/Aboutcancer/Signssymptoms.aspx](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/Cancerinformation/Aboutcancer/Signssymptoms.aspx)