

Healthy living and cancer

A
woman's
guide



The mission of the Irish Cancer Society is to eliminate cancer. Our long-term vision is a future without cancer. Each year we learn more about what causes cancer and how to prevent it, new advances in treatment and new services renews our hope.

Ours goals are:

- To reduce the risk of cancer,
- To improve lives,
- To lead excellent collaborative research, and
- To inform and influence public policy.

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About this booklet

Women today often have very busy, demanding lives. Family, work and other commitments can mean that you leave little time for yourself. The Irish Cancer Society has written this booklet to remind you that it is important to look after yourself and make time for your health.

As you read this booklet you will learn about the different types of cancer that can affect women. You will find information on:

- What you can do to stay healthy
- What increases your chance of getting cancer
- Warning signs and symptoms of cancers that affect women
- Finding cancer early
- How to get the best from a visit to your GP

Each year, around 15,000 women in Ireland are diagnosed with cancer. The chances of getting many of the common cancers are strongly influenced by our lifestyle. But the good news is that you can cut your risk of getting cancer in half if you make healthy lifestyle choices.

The other good news is that most cancers can be treated and cured if they are found early. That is why we want you to know your body, and to take action if you notice anything unusual for you. It will most likely be something other than cancer, so it is important for your overall health to get to the bottom of it.

If you have any questions as you read this booklet, you can put your mind at ease by speaking with one of our specialist cancer nurses in complete confidence.

If you would like more information on any topic, you will find a list of reliable websites and organisations at the back of this booklet. The Irish Cancer Society's Health Promotion Department also has a wide range of leaflets about cancer. Call us on 01 2310 539 to find out more or visit **www.cancer.ie**

To get in touch with an Irish Cancer Society specialist nurse, you can:



Call the National Cancer Helpline
on Freefone 1800 200 700



Email us on helpline@irishcancer.ie



Chat live on the web by logging
onto www.cancer.ie

Red wine is good for you and protects you from cancer.

FALSE.

All types of alcohol increase the risk of cancer. It is the alcohol itself that does the damage. It does not matter whether it is in the form of beer, wine or spirits. For more information on alcohol and cancer, see page **15**.



Only women who sleep around get cervical cancer.

FALSE.

Human papilloma virus (HPV) is the major cause of cervical cancer and is passed on through sexual contact. However, sexual contact with just one person is enough to catch the virus if they have it. For more information on cervical cancer and HPV, see page **24**.

There are lots of myths and misunderstandings about cancer, often causing unnecessary worry. Here are some recent ones we have come across about women and cancer.

Myths and

Ovarian cancer is 'the silent killer'.

FALSE.

Symptoms of ovarian cancer are more "quiet" than silent. In the early stages they can sometimes be easy to ignore or confuse with other common conditions. New research says that there are important warning signs for women to look out for. To find out more about these warning signs, see page **22**.



Antiperspirants and deodorants cause breast cancer.

FALSE.

Researchers have carried out many studies investigating a possible link and there is no evidence to support this claim. For more information on reducing your risk of breast cancer, see page **34**.



A smear test can check for other women's cancers.

FALSE.

A smear test will only test for cervical cancer. It will not test for other cancers of the female reproductive system, like ovarian cancer. For more information on smear tests, see page **25**.

misunderstandings

It's in the genes

FALSE.

Only 5% of all cancers are hereditary or are in your genetic make-up.



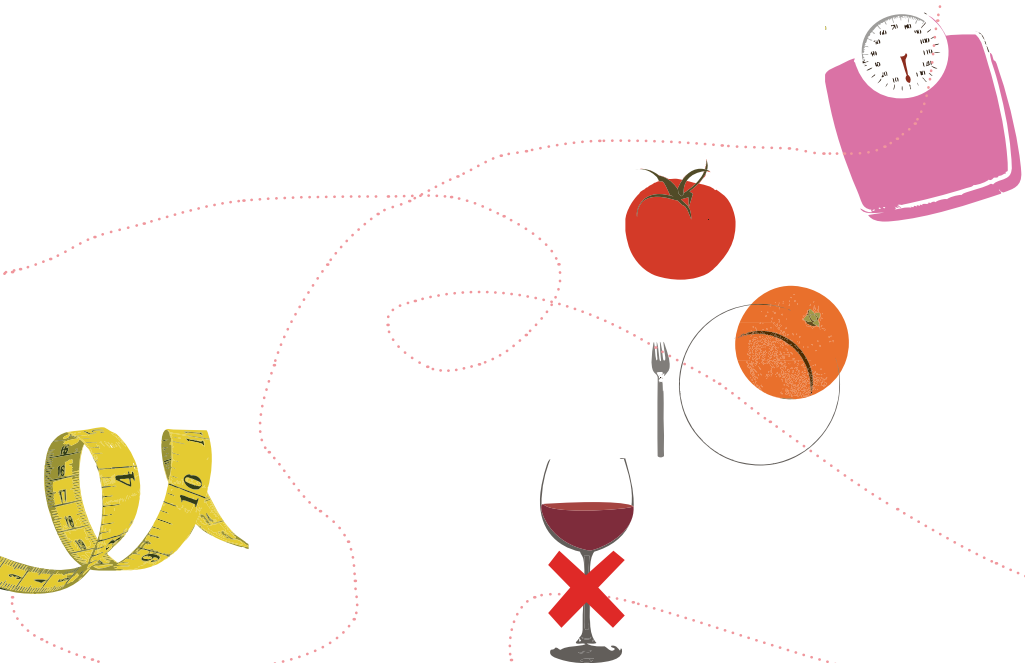
It's not really possible to protect yourself against cancer.

FALSE.

Many people believe that getting cancer is purely down to genes, fate or bad luck. But by making the healthy lifestyle choices described in the next section of this booklet, experts say that up to half of all cancer cases could be prevented.

Positive steps for better health

Half of all cancers
affecting women
could be prevented
by changes to lifestyle





Stop smoking

It's the best present you will ever give yourself.

Be a healthy weight

This is one of the best ways to protect yourself from cancer.

Be safe in the sun

Protect yourself when outdoors, and not just on our rare sunny days.

Limit alcohol

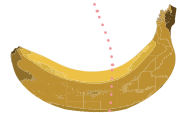
The less you drink, the more you protect yourself against cancer.

Eat for health

Choose a balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables to reduce your risk and prevent cancer.

Be physically active

Women of all ages, shapes and sizes benefit from being active. Physical activity helps protect against getting cancer.




Your health in your hands

Many women think that getting cancer is down to fate, genes or bad luck. Not so. By taking your health in your hands, you can make a big difference to your risk of getting cancer.

Taking charge of your health will not only protect you against cancer and other diseases like heart disease and diabetes, but will leave you looking and feeling great. It feels good to know you are taking control and making healthy choices that will change your life, helping you to live well and longer.

The following chart shows how positive steps for healthy living can protect you against common cancers that affect women. In the following pages you will find more information about each of these steps.

 Protects you from:	Not smoking	Being a healthy weight	Eating a healthy diet	Being active	Cutting down on alcohol	Staying safe in the sun	HPV Vaccine
Breast cancer	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Lung cancer	✓		✓				
Bowel cancer	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Skin cancer						✓	
Cervical cancer	✓						✓
Ovarian cancer		✓	✓				
Womb cancer		✓		✓			

Stop smoking

More women in Ireland are now dying from lung cancer than any other cancer, including breast cancer. Worryingly, the number of women getting lung cancer is rising all the time because more women are smoking. On the other hand, fewer men are getting lung cancer than before because fewer men are smoking.

If you smoke, quitting is by far the most important thing you can do to protect yourself against cancer. **One third** of *all* cancers are caused by smoking, not just lung cancer. The other types of cancers linked to smoking are; mouth and throat, larynx, oesophagus, stomach, bowel, pancreas, kidneys, cervix and bladder.



The simple fact is that smoking is the single biggest cause of cancer and preventable death among women in Ireland.

Most women know that smoking causes cancer, heart disease and early death. Smoking harms your health in so many other ways:

- If you are planning to have a baby, smoking can affect your fertility.
- Smoking during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth and a low birth weight for your baby. Low-weight babies can have poorer health.
- Smoking can lead to an early menopause (change of life).
- If you are a smoker and taking the Pill, you increase your chance of getting a heart attack, stroke, or deep vein thrombosis (blood clot in the leg).
- Smoking can cause osteoporosis (brittle bones).

The good news is that it is never too late to benefit from quitting. After you quit, the health benefits are immediate and your risk of getting lung cancer and other cancers keeps falling.

Help

If you wish to quit smoking, you can get lots of help. Call the National Smokers' Quitline on CallSave **1850 201 203** and speak with a stop-smoking adviser who will talk you through all your options. You can go online www.quit.ie You can also ask your GP or pharmacist for advice that can help you quit for good.

Be a healthy weight

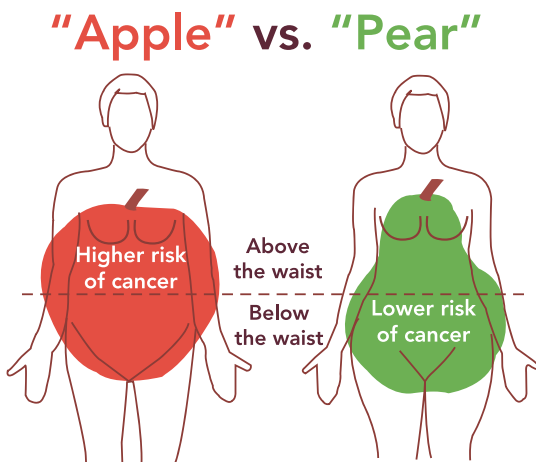
After quitting smoking, keeping a healthy weight is one of the best ways to reduce your chance of getting cancer. Yet more than half of women in Ireland are overweight or obese.

How does being overweight increase my chance of getting cancer?

Fat cells in your body make hormones. So if you are overweight, you make more hormones. High levels of certain hormones can increase the risk of cancer.

Apples and pears

Where fat is stored in your body also affects your health. If you have an apple-shaped body, with fat stored around your waist, you have a higher chance of getting cancer than if you are pear shaped, where fat is stored at your hips and thighs.



Are you a healthy weight?

The best way to find out if you are a healthy weight is to measure your waist or calculate your body mass index (BMI). To measure your waist, find the top of your hipbone and measure your waist at this point with a measuring tape. If your waistline is greater than 31.5 inches, it's time to take action. To calculate your BMI, speak with your GP or pharmacist. You can also learn how to work out your BMI in a helpful booklet called *Reduce your Risk of Cancer*.

Call the Irish Cancer Society
on Freefone **1800 200 700**
for your free copy.



Take control of your weight

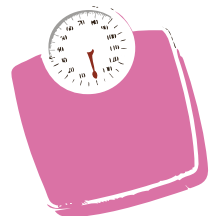
Being a healthy weight is about getting the balance right between what you eat and how active you are. To lose weight permanently, you will need to change the way you think about food and physical activity for good. Be realistic. For most women who are overweight, losing one or two pounds a week is excellent progress. Some weeks will be more difficult than others, the key is to keep going.

Eating a healthy diet and being active will help you to lose weight and keep your weight in check. Read on to find out how eating for health and moving your body can also reduce your chance of getting cancer.

Portion caution



If you want to control your weight, a good first step is to watch portion sizes. Try writing down what and how much you eat and drink for a week. Then see where you can cut down on portion sizes, especially of foods high in calories, fat and added sugars.



Eat for health

What you eat and don't eat have a powerful effect on your health, including your chance of getting cancer.

You might feel confused by all the different messages you hear about what to eat and what not to eat. You can reduce your chance of getting cancer by eating a healthy, balanced diet that is:

- Rich in fruit and vegetables
- High in fibre. Fibre-rich foods include:
 - Fruit and vegetables
 - Wholemeal and wholegrain bread
 - Brown rice and pasta
 - Pulses such as peas, beans and lentils
- Low in red and processed meat, saturated fat and salt.



A healthy diet doesn't just protect you from cancer and other diseases. Eating well will provide you with plenty of energy and the key ingredients for looking and feeling fabulous at any age.



Healthy Eating Index

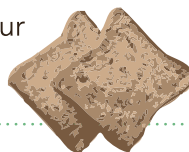


Vegetables and fruits

Eat plenty every day. Fruit and vegetables with a wide variety of colours will help you get a broad range of vitamins and minerals, protecting you from cancer. Not only that, vegetables and fruits are low in calories, so eating them will help you control your weight.

Wholegrains

These help you to stay fuller for longer. To increase your intake of wholegrains, choose brown bread, brown rice, wholewheat pasta and porridge.



Pulses

These include peas, beans and lentils. They are great at keeping hunger pangs at bay. Tinned versions are convenient and delicious added to salads, casseroles or soups. Try to include them in your diet most days.



What's hot

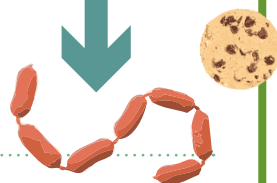


What's Not



Foods high in fat and sugar

These include cakes, sweets and biscuits. Cutting down will help to protect you from a number of cancers, including bowel and breast cancer.



Red and processed meat

Try to use more white meat or fish, rather than red or processed meat. A diet high in red and processed meat is linked to bowel cancer. Sausages, hams, salami and rashers are examples of processed meat

Salt

In Ireland we take almost twice as much salt as we need. Cut out salt when cooking and at the table. Try flavouring food with pepper, herbs, lemon juice, garlic and spices.



Burnt food

Cooking food at very high temperatures, including burnt meat cooked on a barbeque, can increase your chance of getting cancer. Choose baking, boiling, steaming or stir frying as healthy cooking methods.

Be physically active

Being physically active does not have to cost you money. It can include everyday things like gardening, housework, dancing or walking. The more active you are, the more you can cut your chance of getting cancer.



How active do I need to be?

Doing at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on five or more days a week will have a positive effect on your health. Moderate physical activity is any movement that makes you feel warm and breathe a little deeper. It does not have to involve a complicated exercise programme.

Thirty minutes of activity on five or more days a week can reduce your chance of getting cancer even further. Doing 60 or more minutes of moderate physical activity each day will also help you to lose weight.

Walking more is a great way to be more active and can easily fit into your daily routine.

Who benefits?

Women of all ages, shapes and sizes benefit from being active. It doesn't matter how out-of-shape you feel or how long you have been inactive. But remember to increase your level of activity gradually. See your doctor for advice if you are very overweight or have other medical problems.



Top tips for moving your body more

Even small bursts of activity are good for you, and can add up over the course of a day.

- Get off a stop early if you take the bus or the train.
- Walk to and from work or school, if you can, or go for a short walk during your lunch break.
- Take the stairs instead of the lift.
- If you drive, park at the far end of the car park.


Limit alcohol

Drinking alcohol is an important risk factor for breast cancer, and cancer of the mouth, throat, oesophagus, bowel and liver. You can reduce your chance of getting cancer by not drinking alcohol and if you do only drink a little. For example, just one drink a day is linked to an increase in your risk of breast cancer. The more you drink, the higher your risk.



How does alcohol cause cancer?

When our bodies break down alcohol it can directly damage the DNA in our cells. It also produces cancer-causing compounds and raises levels of some hormones, all of which can increase cancer risk.



If you drink and smoke, your risk of cancer is even higher.

Does the type of drink matter?

All types of alcohol increase the risk of cancer, including red wine. It is the alcohol itself that does the damage. It does not matter if it is in the form of beer, wine or spirits.

Is there a safe amount to drink?

You can limit your risk by drinking no more than one standard drink a day:



**½ pint
of beer, lager,
cider or stout**



**1 measure
of spirits**



**A small glass
of wine**

Why should women drink less alcohol than men?

Since the mid-1990s, Irish teenage girls have been drinking as much and sometimes more than their male friends. This culture is very harmful to a woman's health. Women have lower body weights, less body water and more body fat than men, so it takes less alcohol for us to feel the effects and alcohol stays in our bodies longer.



A weighty matter

Did you know that alcohol is high in calories? There are around 600 calories in a bottle of wine – the same as two bars of chocolate!

The benefits of cutting down

As well as reducing your risk of cancer, there are many other benefits to cutting down. You will:

- Be better able to manage your weight
- Have healthier skin – alcohol dehydrates the skin
- Sleep better
- Have more energy
- Have more money
- Have improved mental health
- Have a lower risk of stroke and heart disease

Be safe in the sun

Skin cancer is the most common cancer in Ireland in women and men, and the number of new skin cancer cases is rising. Almost all cases are caused by ultraviolet rays from the sun and can be prevented.



While most of us think that skin cancer is linked directly to sunburn, the reality is that skin cancer can be caused by regular exposure to the sun over a long period of time – even in Irish weather. Getting a little bit of sun every day can add up without you realising it. This is especially so if you take regular walks, garden regularly, play sports or generally spend a lot of time outside.

If you spend a lot of time outdoors, be sensible. Follow the SunSmart Code and not just on our rare sunny days!

The SunSmart Code

To reduce your chance of getting skin cancer, follow the SunSmart Code.

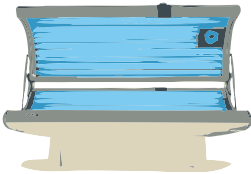
- **Cover up** – wear a shirt with a collar and long shorts. Also wear a hat that gives shade to your face, neck and ears.
- **Seek shade** – especially between 11am and 3pm.
- **Wear wraparound sunglasses** – and make sure that they protect you against ultraviolet rays.
- **Slap on sunscreen** – use a sunscreen with SPF 15 or higher and look for the UVA symbol on the bottle (the letters UVA in a circle). Apply lots of sunscreen about 20 minutes before going out in the sun. Reapply every two hours and more often if you have been swimming or sweating.



Who needs to take extra care?

All women are at risk of getting skin cancer. But you need to take extra care if you have:

- Pale or freckled skin that does not tan easily or burns before it tans
- Naturally red or fair hair
- Blue, green or grey eyes
- A large number of moles
- Already had skin cancer
- A history of sunburn
- Used sunbeds
- A close family member who has had skin cancer.



What about sunbeds?

Using a sunbed further increases your chance of getting skin cancer. The strength of ultraviolet radiation (UVR) from sunbeds can be five times stronger than the midday Mediterranean sun. Sunbeds can also cause wrinkles, premature ageing and leathery skin.

Notes

Women's cancers

In this section, we give you the most important information about cancers that affect women. These are known as gynaecological cancers and they begin in a woman's reproductive system.

The five gynaecological cancers are:

Ovarian cancer

Cervical cancer

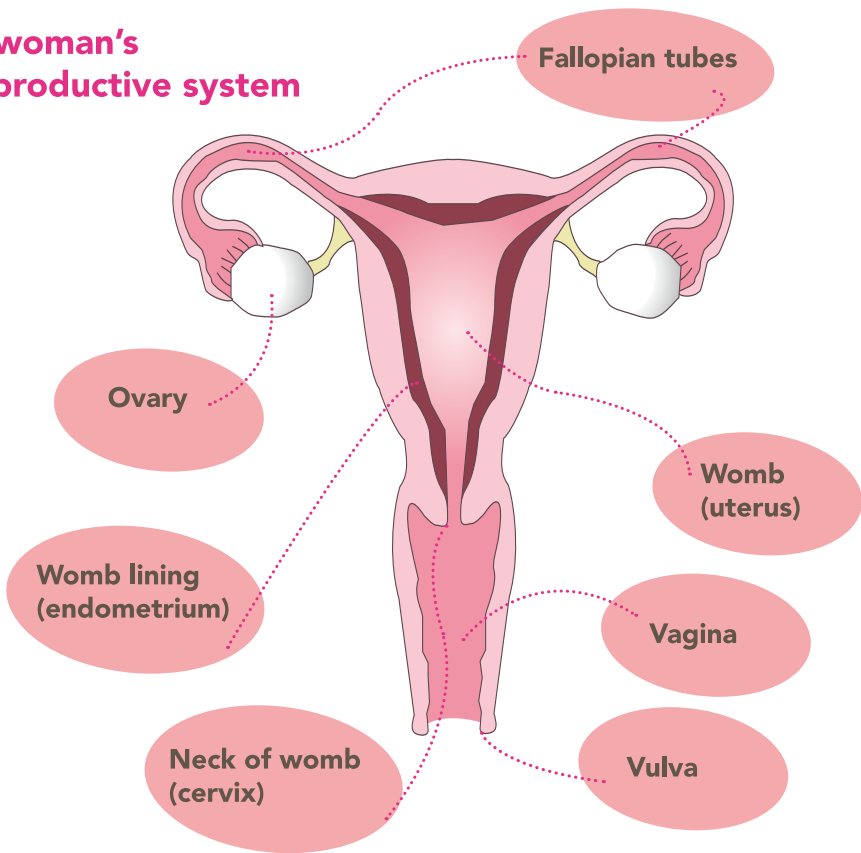
Womb cancer

(also known as endometrial or uterine cancer)

Vaginal cancer

Vulval cancer

A woman's reproductive system



Ovaries

You have two ovaries that are located in your pelvis. The ovaries make female hormones and produce eggs. When cancer starts in your ovaries or fallopian tube, it is called ovarian cancer.

Cervix

The cervix is at the top of your vagina and opens into your womb. It is also known as the neck of the womb. When cancer starts in your cervix, it is called cervical cancer.

Womb

The womb is the pear-shaped organ in your pelvis. Also called the uterus, your womb is where the baby grows when you are pregnant. When cancer starts in your womb, it is called womb cancer.

Vagina

Also called the birth canal, your vagina links the bottom of your womb to the outside of your body.

When cancer starts in your vagina, it is called vaginal cancer.

Vulva

Your vulva is the outer part of your genital organs. It has two folds of skin called the labia. When cancer starts in your vulva, it is called vulval cancer.

While gynaecological cancers are sometimes discussed as a group, each gynaecological cancer is unique. Each one has different signs, symptoms and risk factors (things that may increase your chance of getting cancer). The following pages describe each of the five gynaecological cancers and will help you understand what it is you need to look out for.

At the end of this section, you will find a handy symptoms chart which sums up the main warning signs and symptoms of each of these cancers.

What you need to know about ovarian cancer

Who gets ovarian cancer?

Each year, about 300 women in Ireland get ovarian cancer. All women are at risk of ovarian cancer, but it is rare in women under the age of 40. Most women who get ovarian cancer have gone through the menopause (change of life).



Each year, about 300 women in Ireland get ovarian cancer.

What are the signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer?

The symptoms of ovarian cancer can be vague and quite mild. For a long time, doctors thought that ovarian cancer did not have many symptoms, especially in the early stages. However, more recent studies tell us that symptoms in early ovarian cancer can include:

- Pain in your abdomen or pelvis
- Persistent bloating that does not go away
- Not being able to eat as much and feeling full more quickly
- Swollen abdomen
- Back pain

- Change in bowel or bladder habits, such as diarrhoea, constipation or wanting to pass urine very often
- Vaginal discharge or bleeding that is not normal for you

If you have any unusual vaginal bleeding, see your GP straight away. If you have any of the other signs for two weeks or longer and they are not normal for you, see your GP.



If you do have something that is not normal for you, it is important for your overall health to find out what is causing it. Don't be happy until you get to the bottom of it. For more information on getting the best out of your GP visit, see page **46**.

What increases my chance of getting ovarian cancer?

The cause of ovarian cancer is unknown and there is no way of knowing if you will get it. As with most cancers, your risk of ovarian cancer increases as you get older. Apart from getting older, you may have a higher chance of getting ovarian cancer if you:

- Have close family members (such as your mother, sister, aunt or grandmother) on either your mother's or father's side who have had ovarian cancer
- Have never been pregnant
- Are overweight or obese
- Have taken hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for 10 years or more (the hormone oestrogen by itself, without progesterone)




Researchers are also checking if being infertile or taking drugs for fertility treatment may slightly increase your risk of ovarian cancer.

If one or more of these is true for you, it does not mean you will get ovarian cancer. But you should talk to your GP about your risk.

What you need to know about cervical cancer

Who gets cervical cancer?

Each year, over 300 women in Ireland get cervical cancer. Cervical cancer can happen at any age, but it is most common in women in their 40s and 50s.



Each year, over 300 women in Ireland get cervical cancer.

What are the signs and symptoms of cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer may cause the following warning signs:

- Vaginal bleeding that is not normal for you. This might be bleeding after sex, bleeding in between your periods, or bleeding after the menopause
- A vaginal discharge that may smell unpleasant
- Pain or discomfort during sex or in your pelvis

Take notice of your body and know what is normal for you. If you have any unusual vaginal bleeding, see your GP straight away. If you have any of the other signs for two weeks or longer, see your GP.

What increases my chance of getting cervical cancer?

Human papilloma virus (HPV)

- There is strong evidence that most cervical cancer cases are caused by a virus called human papilloma virus (HPV). Most women who are sexually active will have HPV at some point in their lives. HPV is passed on from one person to another by skin to skin contact and sexual intercourse. In general, it

disappears naturally over time. But some women can have trouble getting rid of the virus, especially if they smoke. HPV infections can lead to abnormal changes in the cells of your cervix. Over time, these changes can turn into cancer.

Smoking

- Smoking increases your chance of getting cervical cancer. When you smoke, chemicals that cause cancer travel to your cervix and can affect how it fights infection.

How can I help lower my chance of getting cervical cancer?

You can significantly lower your chance of getting cervical cancer by:

- Having regular smear tests
- Getting vaccinated against the HPV virus
- Not smoking or quitting smoking



Regular smear tests

Cervical cancer is the only gynaecological cancer that can be prevented by having a regular smear test. A smear test can pick up changes to cervical cells when they are precancerous. This means that if left untreated, they may become cancerous over time.

CervicalCheck is a free service that provides smear tests to women aged between 25 and 60 years. To arrange your smear test, contact a registered smearer of your choice to make an appointment. GPs, practice nurses, Women's Health, Family Planning and Well Woman Clinics all over Ireland are registered.

For more information on the importance of smear tests, see page **44**.

A full list is available at www.cervicalcheck.ie, or you can call CervicalCheck on Freephone 1800 45 45 55.

Getting vaccinated against HPV


The HPV vaccine is a safe and effective way to reduce your risk of getting cervical cancer. The vaccine is proven to work best when given to girls before they have been exposed to the virus. This means before their first sexual contact. The vaccine is available free to all girls in first year of secondary school.

Remember that if you are vaccinated against the HPV virus, **you still need to have regular smear tests**. The vaccine lowers your chance of getting cervical cancer, but you are still at risk.

What you need to know about womb (uterine) cancer

Who gets womb cancer?

Over 300 women are diagnosed with womb cancer each year in Ireland. All women are at risk, except those who had an operation to remove the womb (hysterectomy). Womb cancer is more common in women over the age of 50.



Each year, over 300 women in Ireland get womb cancer.

What are the signs and symptoms of womb cancer?

Womb cancer may cause the following warning signs:

- Vaginal bleeding that is not normal for you. This might be bleeding after sex, bleeding in between your periods, or bleeding after the menopause
- Vaginal discharge that may smell unpleasant
- Persistent pain or pressure in your pelvis

Take notice of your body and know what is normal for you. If you have any unusual vaginal bleeding, see your GP straight away. If you have any of the other signs for two weeks or longer, see your GP.

What increases my chance of getting womb cancer?

As with most cancers, your risk of womb cancer increases as you get older. Apart from getting older, you may have a higher chance of getting womb cancer if you:

- Are overweight or obese
- Have never been pregnant
- Have taken hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for 10 years or more (the hormone oestrogen by itself, without progesterone)



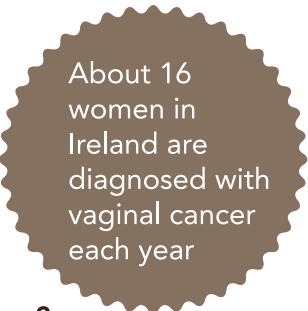
If one or more of these is true for you, it does not mean you will get womb cancer. But you should talk to your GP about your risk.



What you need to know about vulval and vaginal cancers

Who gets vaginal cancer?

Vaginal cancer in Ireland is very rare. About 16 women are diagnosed with it each year. It is most common in women over the age of 60, but the number of cases in younger women is rising.



About 16 women in Ireland are diagnosed with vaginal cancer each year

What are the signs and symptoms of vaginal cancer?

Vaginal cancer may have the following warning signs:

- Vaginal bleeding, often after sex
- Abnormal vaginal discharge
- Pain during sex
- An itch in the vagina that won't go away
- Frequency and discomfort when passing urine
- Pain in the back passage (rectum)

What increases my chance of getting vaginal cancer?

The cause of vaginal cancer is unknown, but it is more common if you:

- Have been exposed to HPV. For more information on HPV, see page **24**
- Have a history of abnormal smear test results or you have had cervical cancer
- Are a smoker

Vulval and vaginal cancers are rare, but you should take notice of your body and know what is normal for you. If you have any unusual vaginal bleeding, see your GP straight away. If you have any of the other warning signs for vulval or vaginal cancer for two weeks or longer, see your GP.

Who gets vulval cancer?

Vulval cancer is also very rare. About 40 women in Ireland are diagnosed with the disease every year. Vulval cancer is usually found in women over the age of 50, but the number of cases in younger women is rising.

About 40 women in Ireland are diagnosed with vulval cancer each year

What are the signs and symptoms of vulval cancer?

The warning signs of vulval cancer include:

- Severe itching, burning or bleeding on the vulva that does not go away
- Colour changes on the skin of the vulva, where it is redder or whiter than normal for you
- Sores, new lumps, a rash or warts on the vulva that do not go away
- Pain in your pelvis, especially when you pass urine or have sex

What increases my chance of getting vulval cancer?

The cause of vulval cancer is unknown, but it is more common if you:

- Have been exposed to HPV. For more information on HPV, see page **24**
- Have a history of abnormal smear test results or have had cervical cancer
- Are a smoker

- Have chronic vulval itching or burning
- Have long-term vulval skin conditions are also linked to vulval cancer. This may be a possible cause of the increased cancer risk

If you are worried about having an increased risk of vaginal or vulval cancers, talk to your GP.



A smear test does not test for ovarian, womb, vaginal or vulval cancers. It only tests for cervical cancer.

A summary of gynaecological cancer symptoms

Each gynaecological cancer has different symptoms. Often symptoms can be easy to ignore or confuse with another condition. That is why it is important to take notice of your body and know what is normal for you.

We have summarised some of the signs and symptoms often linked to women's cancers in this chart. See your GP immediately if you have bleeding that is not normal for you. For example, if it is heavier or unusual.

See your GP if you have any of the other symptoms for two weeks or longer. It may be nothing to worry about, but find out for sure.





Symptom

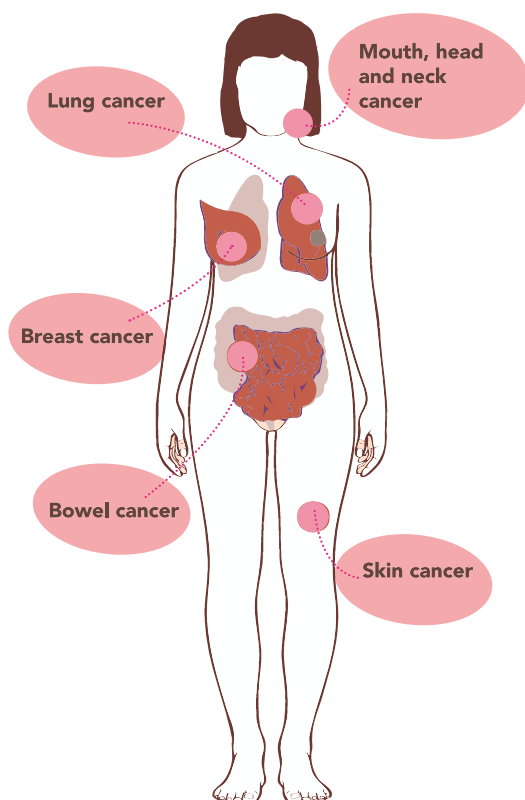
	Cervical cancer	Ovarian cancer	Womb cancer	Vaginal cancer	Vulval cancer
Unusual vaginal discharge	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pain in your pelvis	✓	✓	✓		✓
Pain in your abdomen or lower back		✓	✓		
Bloating/ swollen abdomen		✓			
Changes in bowel or bladder habits		✓		✓	
Itching or burning of the vulva					✓
Changes in vulva colour or skin, such as a rash or warts					✓
Unusual vaginal bleeding	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Discomfort or pain during sexual intercourse	✓		✓	✓	
Feeling full more quickly		✓			

Other common cancers affecting women

Remember that gynaecological cancers and breast cancer are not the only cancers that affect women.

After breast cancer, the most common cancers that affect women living in Ireland are bowel cancer, skin cancer and lung cancer.

More women die from lung cancer than any other cancer, followed by breast cancer and bowel cancer.



The following chart sums up the most important information about these other common cancers. The Irish Cancer Society has a wide range of information leaflets about each of these cancers. To order them, you can contact us on **01 231 0539**. Or you can download the leaflets by logging onto **www.cancer.ie**

What you need to know about breast cancer

Who gets breast cancer?

2,600
women

- Each year in Ireland, over 2,600 women and 20 men are diagnosed with breast cancer
- Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women in Ireland, after non-melanoma skin cancer
- Most women who get breast cancer are over the age of 50, but you can get it at a younger age

What increases my risk of breast cancer?

- Being female
- Getting older
- A previous breast cancer
- A history of breast lumps that are benign (not cancer)
- Taking hormone replacement therapy (HRT)
- Taking the contraceptive pill
- Alcohol
- Being overweight and not being active
- Starting your periods at an early age or having a late menopause (change of life)
- Having no children or having them late in life
- Having a family history of breast cancer or ovarian cancer

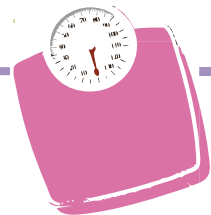
What you need to know about breast cancer

What are the signs and symptoms of breast cancer?

- A change in size or shape such as one breast becoming larger than the other
- A change in the skin such as puckering or dimpling (like orange peel)
- A change in the direction or shape of your nipple, especially if it sinks into your breast or becomes irregular in shape
- An unusual discharge (liquid) from one or both of your nipples
- A change on or around the nipple such as a rash or flaky or crusted skin
- Swelling in your armpit or around your collarbone
- A lump or thickening in your breast
- Constant pain in one part of your breast or armpit

How can I protect myself against breast cancer?

- Limit how much alcohol you drink
- Be physically active
- Eat a healthy diet
- Be a healthy weight
- Breastfeed your baby
- Do not smoke
- Attend breast screening



What you need to know about bowel cancer

Who gets bowel cancer?

900
women

- Each year in Ireland, over 900 women are diagnosed with bowel cancer
- Bowel cancer is the second most common cancer among women in Ireland
- Most women who get bowel cancer are over the age of 50, but you can get it at a younger age

What increases my chance of getting bowel cancer?

- Eating a diet high in fats and low in fruit, vegetables and fibre
- High intake of red and processed meat
- Not being physically active
- Being obese or overweight
- A previous bowel cancer
- A family history of bowel cancer
- You or someone in your family has or had polyps. A polyp is an abnormal growth of tissue in the lining of your bowel
- A history of bowel conditions like ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease

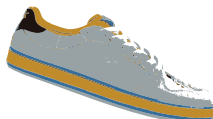
What are the signs and symptoms of bowel cancer?

- Blood in your bowel motion or bleeding from your back passage (rectum)
- A lasting change (more than a month) in your bowel habits, such as diarrhoea or constipation
- Feeling that you have not emptied your bowel fully after going to the toilet
- Pain or discomfort in your abdomen (tummy) or back passage
- Trapped wind or fullness in your tummy
- Weight loss for no reason
- Ongoing general tiredness

What you need to know about bowel cancer

How can I protect myself against bowel cancer?

- Lead a healthier lifestyle, in particular:
 - Eat a healthy diet, full of fruit and vegetables
 - Be a healthy body weight
 - Be active
 - Don't smoke
 - Limit alcohol
 - For more information, see page **45**
- Attend for screening when you are invited. For more information see page **45**



Bowel cancer screening

- BowelScreen is the National Bowel Cancer screening programme and is a free service for men and women aged 60-69.
- The programme will be implemented on a phased basis and over time the programme will be extended to the 55-74 age groups.
- Eligible men and women will receive a letter inviting them to take part. Those who want to take part will call the Freephone number and will then be sent a home test kit called FIT (Faecal Immunochemical Test) in the post.
- The test, which looks for blood in the bowel motion, is simple and easy to use.
- For further information contact the Freephone information line **1800 45 45 55, www.bowelscreen.ie**
- In the meantime, it is important to know the early warning signs of bowel cancer, listed on page **35**.

What you need to know about lung cancer

Who gets lung cancer?

**800
women**

- Each year in Ireland, around 800 women are diagnosed with lung cancer
- This figure has been steadily rising because more women are smoking
- More women in Ireland die from lung cancer than any other cancer, including breast cancer

What increases my chance of getting lung cancer?

- Smoking. For every 10 cases of lung cancer, nine of them are caused by smoking
- Second-hand smoke. Breathing in other people's smoke puts you at a greater risk
- Being exposed to certain substances such as radon or asbestos

What are the signs and symptoms of lung cancer?

- A cough that does not go away
- A change in a long-term cough
- Feeling short of breath or wheezing
- Chest infections that do not clear up even after antibiotics
- Coughing up blood
- Pain in your chest, especially when you cough or breathe in
- Unexplained weight loss

How can I protect myself against lung cancer?

- Nine out of 10 lung cancers are caused by smoking. If you smoke, quitting is the single most important thing you can do to protect yourself from getting cancer, not just lung cancer
- For more information on quitting, see page 9

What you need to know about skin cancer

Who gets skin cancer?

- Around 3000 women in Ireland are diagnosed each year with non-melanoma skin cancer, a less serious form of skin cancer
- Around 400 women are diagnosed with melanoma skin cancer each year. This is the most serious form of skin cancer
- Skin cancer can affect women of all ages

**3,000
women**

What increases my chance of getting skin cancer?

- Getting too much of the sun's harmful ultra-violet rays
- Pale or freckled skin which burns easily or tans poorly
- Red or fair hair and blue, green or grey eyes
- A lot of moles (50 or more) or unusual moles
- A history of severe sunburn, especially in childhood or teenage years
- Using sunbeds
- A history of any type of skin cancer
- A family history of melanoma

What are the signs and symptoms of skin cancer?

- A change in the shape, size or colour of a mole
- A new growth or sore that does not heal in a few weeks
- A spot or sore that continues to itch, hurt, crust, scab or bleed
- Constant skin ulcers that are not explained by other causes

What can I do to protect myself against skin cancer?

- The main cause of skin cancer is exposing your skin to the sun
- Follow the SunSmart Code to protect yourself from skin cancer. For more information, see page **17**
- Never use a sunbed
- Get to know your skin and what is normal for you. Check it often for any changes

What you need to know about mouth, head and neck cancer

Mouth, head and neck cancer can affect your lips, gums, cheeks, tongue, palate, tonsil, throat, salivary glands, sinuses, nose and voice box

Who gets mouth, head and neck cancer?

120
women

- Each year in Ireland, about 120 women are diagnosed with mouth, head and neck cancer
- It is more common in men, but more women are being diagnosed in recent years
- It mainly affects older people but more younger people are now being diagnosed

What increases my chance of getting mouth, head and neck cancer?

- Smoking cigarettes, cigars, pipes or marijuana
- Chewing smokeless tobacco
- Drinking alcohol and products containing alcohol
- HPV is a known cause of cancer in the tonsil and throat area.
- Too much sun increases your risk of lip cancer
- If you drink and smoke, your risk is even greater

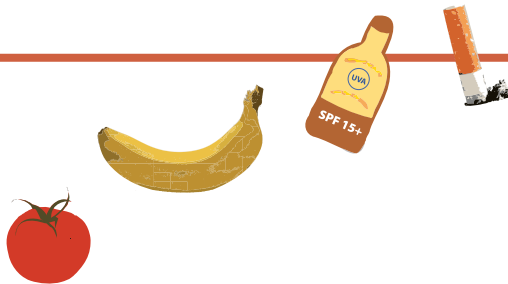
What are the signs and symptoms of mouth, head and neck cancer?

- A sore or ulcer in your mouth that does not heal
- White or red patches inside your mouth
- A lump in your mouth or neck
- Thickening or hardening of your cheek or tongue
- Difficulty chewing, swallowing or moving your tongue
- Numbness of your tongue or face
- A persistent sore throat and hoarseness
- Persistent nosebleeds and a stuffy nose
- Unexplained loose teeth

What you need to know about mouth, head and neck cancer

How can I protect myself against mouth, head and neck cancer?

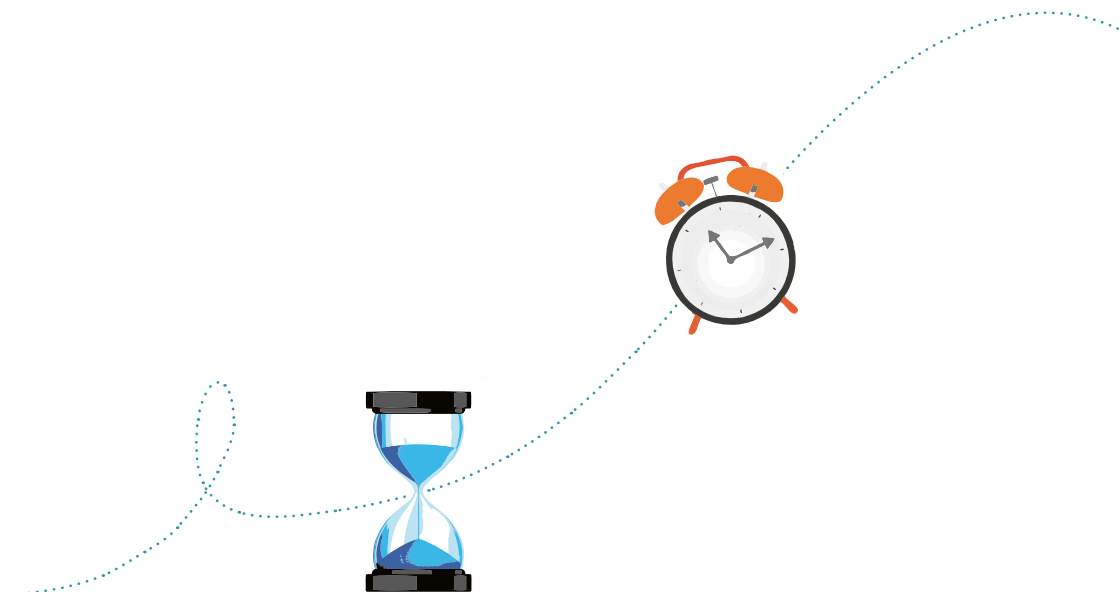
- Do not smoke. If you do smoke, plan to quit. For more information, see page **9**
- Limit your intake of alcohol. For more information, see page **15**
- Use a lip balm that contains sunblock
- Eat a healthy diet
- Check your mouth regularly for changes, for example, when brushing your teeth
- Visit your dentist regularly, even if you have no teeth and wear dentures



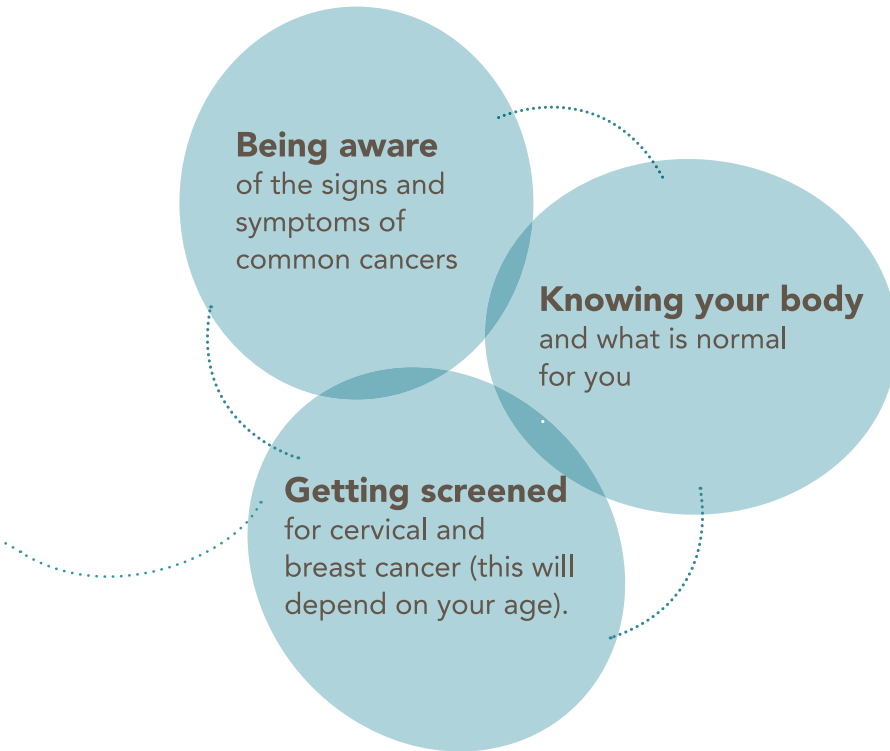
Notes

Finding cancer early

**Thousands of women
in Ireland beat cancer
every year. Finding
cancer early greatly
improves your chances
of successful treatment.**



You can increase your chance of finding cancer early by:



In previous sections we have listed the signs and symptoms of women's cancers (page **20**) and other common cancers affecting women (page **32**). Here we emphasise the importance of knowing your body and getting screened.

Know your body

It is vital to be aware of your body and to know what is normal for you. If you know what is normal for you, it will be easier to notice when something is different. If you notice any unexplained or persistent change, do not ignore it. Get it checked out by your GP.

Quite often when women notice something different about themselves, they don't think much of it. This is especially so for women as they approach the menopause, because they expect their bodies to start behaving differently.

But don't be tempted to put something unusual down to the menopause or getting older before you have seen your GP. Let them know what you have noticed, even if you are not concerned by it. Chances are it is nothing to worry about, but it is better to play safe. On the following page, we give you our top 10 tips for getting the best out of a visit to your GP.

Regular check-ups

Regular check-ups with your GP are a valuable tool in knowing your body and keeping in good health, even if you feel there is nothing wrong with you. It's also a good time to discuss any worries you might have about your health.



Screening

Cancer screening means that healthy people are tested for signs that could be or could become cancer. For example, testing for abnormal changes in your cervix when you have no symptoms is called screening. These tests can also find cancer early, before you feel any symptoms. We know that screening saves hundreds of women's lives every year.

Cancer screening saves lives. It is vital for preventing and finding cancer early.

The chart below gives details about national cancer screening programmes in Ireland. BreastCheck and CervicalCheck are screening programmes for women. It also gives details about a bowel cancer screening programme BowelScreen which will begin in 2013 for men and women.

Breast cancer screening

- BreastCheck invites women aged 50 to 64 for a free mammogram (breast X-ray) every two years.
- Women in this age category should be sent an invitation.
- Make sure you are on the invitation list by contacting BreastCheck on Freefone **1800 45 45 55** or by checking online at **www.breastcheck.ie**.
- BreastCheck screens women aged 50 to 64, but women under age 50 and over age 65 are still at risk of breast cancer. If you have reached 65, talk to your GP about further mammograms.
- As a woman, it's important for you to be breast aware throughout your life, including between screening mammograms. See page **34** for changes to notice.

Cervical cancer screening

- CervicalCheck is a free service that provides smear tests to women aged between 25 and 60 years.
- A smear test is a simple test that only takes minutes and is the best way to spot changes in the cells of your cervix.
- To arrange your smear test, you can contact a registered smear taker of your choice and make an appointment. GPs, practice nurses, women's health, family planning and Well Woman clinics all over Ireland are registered. A full list is available at **www.cervicalcheck.ie** or by calling Freefone **1800 45 45 55**.
- CervicalCheck also sends invitation letters to women who are on the CervicalCheck register. This is to remind you to come for screening when your next smear test is due.
- Even when you have been screened, you should be aware of your body and know the early warning signs for cervical cancer, listed on page **24**.

1

Find a GP who you are comfortable with. If you are uncomfortable going to a male GP, it is perfectly reasonable to ask if there is a female GP in the same practice. You can also check with Well Woman and Family Planning Centres listed at the back of this booklet

2

Make a list of what you want to ask the doctor. It's easy to forget the most important things during a visit.



3

Practise describing the symptoms you are feeling. Your GP will probably ask questions such as: When did it start? How does it feel? Did this ever happen before? What have you done about it so far? Are you on any medication at the moment? It can also be helpful to keep track of the symptoms in a chart and show this to your doctor.

Top 10 tips for getting the best

6

Be honest. It can also be difficult to tell your doctor about other concerns you might have. For example, you might not be able to understand the medical information, or you might be worried about costs such as travel, medication or getting a babysitter. You need to be honest so that your GP can give you the care you need.

7

Listen to what they say. Most people pick up less than half of what their doctor has told them during a visit. It can help if you write down the important points you have talked about.

Don't forget about your local pharmacist, who can be a great source of information. They can help with your healthcare questions and give advice on medications.

4

Arrive informed. It is a good idea to search for information on the topic before you see your GP. But remember that some information on the internet cannot be trusted. You can speak with a specialist cancer nurse by calling the National Cancer Helpline on Freefone **1800 200 700**, or check the list of websites at the back of this booklet for reliable sites.



5

Don't be embarrassed. Some symptoms are hard to talk about. For example, you might feel pain during sex or you might have a rash 'down there'. We promise that your doctor has heard it all before.



from your GP visit

If you are concerned about a change you have noticed or if you are going for a check-up, here are our top tips for getting the very best from your GP visit.

8

Ask questions. If you don't understand don't be ashamed.

9

Don't let yourself feel rushed. GPs can be busy and their body language can sometimes make it hard for you to get through all your queries. Be sure to get your questions answered, but be realistic about how many you can ask in one appointment.

10

Don't be afraid to get a second opinion. Trust your GP, but take action if you are not happy with the answers you are getting. Your health is a partnership between you and your GP – but it's your body. If you have something that is not normal for you, it's important that you get to the bottom of it. Ask for an appointment with a specialist if you want a second opinion. Then explain why you want a second opinion.

European Code Against Cancer

In Ireland and in Europe about 1 in 3 people will develop cancer at some stage in their life. The great news is that due to better treatments and picking up cancer earlier, more and more people are surviving cancer.

The European Code Against Cancer sums up the steps you can take to protect yourself against cancer, and to find cancer early.

1. If you smoke, plan to quit.
2. If you drink alcohol, cut down on the amount you drink.
3. Eat a healthy diet by increasing your daily intake of fruit and vegetables and by eating a range of foods low in fat and high in fibre.
4. Be a healthy weight by being more active every day and eating less fatty foods.
5. Protect yourself in the sun and avoid sunburn, especially in children.
6. See your doctor if you notice a lump, a sore that does not heal, a mole that changes in shape, size or colour or bleeds.
7. See your doctor if you have ongoing problems, like a cough or hoarseness, a change in your bowel or bladder habits or unexplained weight loss.
8. Attend your screening appointment.

In Ireland and in Europe about 1 in 3 people will develop cancer at some stage in their life.

Notes

Support Resources

**What does that
word mean?**

.....

My Action Plan

.....

**Useful organisations
and sources of
information**

.....



What does that word mean?

Abdomen	The part of your body that lies between your chest and hips.
Benign	Not cancer.
Biopsy	A test where a doctor removes a small amount of tissue to find out if cancer is present.
Cancer	A group of diseases in which cells in your body grow out of control. These abnormal cells can begin in one part of your body and spread to other body parts. There are many types of cancer.
Cell	The building blocks that make up your body. They are tiny and can only be seen under a microscope.
Chemotherapy	The use of drugs that kill or control cancer cells.
Diagnosis	Identifying a disease based on its signs and symptoms and medical testing.
Gene	The basic unit that holds information to build cells and pass genetic traits from parent to child.
Human papilloma virus (HPV)	A very common virus that can cause changes to cells. It is passed on during sex or sexual contact.
Malignant	Cancer.
Menopause	The time of life when a woman's periods stop.
Oncology	The study of cancer.
Pelvis	The area below your belly and in between your hipbones.
Radiotherapy	The use of X-rays to destroy cancer.
Risk factor	Anything that increases your chance of getting a disease.
Screening	Checking for disease in healthy people.
Symptoms	A change or feature that you notice in your body.

My Action Plan

Steps I am going to take to protect myself against cancer:

Useful organisations and sources of information

Irish Cancer Society

The Health Promotion Department of the Irish Cancer Society has a wide range of leaflets and factsheets about a variety of cancers. To order them, please contact us on **01 231 0539**.

Anyone who is concerned about cancer can speak to a specialist nurse in confidence by calling the National Cancer Helpline on Freefone **1800 200 700**. The Helpline is open Monday–Thursday 9am–7pm and Fridays 9am–5pm.

Those who wish to speak to a specialist nurse can also contact us through our:

- **Walk-in service** – visit us in person at the Irish Cancer Society offices at 43/45 Northumberland Road, Dublin 4
- **Email service** – email us at helpline@irishcancer.ie
- **CancerChat** – chat live on the web with a specialist cancer nurse by logging onto www.cancer.ie
- **Message Board** – visit our online bulletin board at www.cancer.ie
- **National Smokers' Quitline** – for help quitting smoking, call the National Smokers' Quitline on Callsave 1850 201 203

Alcohol Action Ireland

Butler Court

25 Great Strand Street

Dublin 1

Tel: 01 878 0610

Website: www.alcoholireland.ie

BreastCheck: The National Breast Screening Programme

King's Inns House

200 Parnell Street

Dublin 1

Tel: 01 865 9300

Freefone: 1800 45 45 55

Email: info@breastcheck.ie

Website: www.breastcheck.ie

Bowel Screen: The National Bowel Screening Programme

Kings Inns House

200 Parnell Street

Dublin 1

Freephone 1800 45 45 55

CervicalCheck: The National Cervical Screening Programme

PO Box 161

Limerick

Freefone: 1800 45 45 55

Email: info@cervicalcheck.ie

Website: www.cervicalcheck.ie

Get Ireland Active

For information on getting active and managing your weight,
visit www.getirelandactive.ie

European Institute of Women's Health

www.eurohealth.ie

Europa Donna Ireland

www.europadonnaireland.ie

Health Promotion Unit

Tel: 01 635 4000

Website: www.healthpromotion.ie

Irish Heart Foundation

50 Ringsend Road, Dublin 4

Tel: 01 668 5001

Website: www.irishheart.ie

National Smokers' Quitline

Callsave 1850 201 203

Quit.ie

For help, information and advice on quitting smoking,
visit www.quit.ie

Well Woman and family planning centres

Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA)

Tel: 01 872 7088 / 874 2110

Website: www.ifpa.ie

Well Woman Centre

Tel: 01 872 8051 / 872 8095

Website: www.wellwomancentre.ie

Notes

www.cancer.ie

