

Key issues

Awareness, understanding, myths and misinformation



An initiative of



International Union
Against Cancer

Increased awareness and accurate information and knowledge can empower all of us to recognise early warning signs, make informed choices about our health and counter our own fears and misconceptions about cancer.

Know your body: early detection saves lives

Not all cancers show early signs and symptoms.

However, many cancers can and do show signs that something isn't quite right. These include breast, cervical, colorectal, skin, oral, and some childhood cancers.

That's important to know because finding cancer early almost always makes it easier to treat or even cure. Which means improved chances of survival and quality of life for people diagnosed with cancer.

What's more, recognising early warning signs of some cancer is cost-effective and, in many cases, doesn't require any specialist technologies.

Each of us can be empowered with the right information to know what's normal for our bodies and recognise unusual changes – and importantly, seek professional medical help promptly¹.

What can we do?

- As an **individual**, we can teach ourselves, the people we love – including teachers, parents and caregivers and our communities - about the common signs and symptoms.
- **Health professionals** need to understand the signs and symptoms to avoid misdiagnosis and understand and encourage the value of early detection in their patients.
- **Policy makers** have a critical role to play. **Governments** can develop strategies to increase awareness and education and integrate early detection and screening into national health systems.

Fast fact:

A recent UK study found that for eight common cancers – bladder, bowel, breast, cervical, womb, malignant melanoma, ovarian and testicular cancers – survival is three times higher when diagnosed early².

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Screening for cancer

Even if you don't have any signs or symptoms of cancer and may appear otherwise healthy, screening for some types of cancer can test for signs of it developing³.

Some cancers that can be effectively screened for includes bowel, breast, cervical, colorectal (colon) and lung. However, this does vary from country to country.

Myths, misinformation and stigma

Some common myths and misconceptions about cancer - including that there is no cure or there is nothing that can be done about cancer - can understandably cause fear.

However, misinformation, misconceptions and stigma around cancer creates a negative cycle that further acts to confirm our fears.

Our fears can prevent us from seeking early detection, or to delay or avoid treatment and care altogether. Often, by receiving diagnosis at a late stage or not seeking treatment at all, this can result in worse outcomes, which in turn perpetuates the myths and misconception of cancer being incurable or untreatable.

What can we do?

- **Access accurate cancer information**
By being informed, you can counter your own misconceptions and reduce your own fears around cancer. Through knowledge, awareness and understanding, you are empowered to challenge negative beliefs and attitudes and behaviours in others that perpetuate myths about cancer.
- **Use your voice**
By talking, we can help to reduce fear and stigma and discrimination, shift perceptions and strengthen support for people with cancer.
- **Understand different cultural beliefs**
Understanding cultural beliefs and practices around cancer is essential in responding to it and changing attitudes and dispelling common myths.
- **Empower individuals and communities**
Governments, communities, employers and media all have a role to play to challenge perceptions about cancer to create a culture and a population where people living with cancer do not face discrimination in the workplace, in the health system or in our society.

1. Cancer Research UK. Key signs and symptoms of cancer. http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/cancer-symptoms#accordion_symptoms13

2. Cancer Research UK. Survival three times higher when cancer is diagnosed early. <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-us/cancer-news/press-release/2015-08-10-survival-three-times-higher-when-cancer-is-diagnosed-early>

3. Cancer Research UK. Understanding cancer screening. <http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/screening/understanding-cancer-screening>