# Persistent heartburn may signal early oesophageal cancer, warns NHS



NHS health experts have highlighted persistent heartburn as a commonly overlooked symptom that could indicate the early stages of oesophageal cancer, one of the leading causes of cancer-related deaths in the UK. According to a recent NHS England survey, 79 per cent of the British public do not associate heartburn lasting three weeks or more with a potential cancer warning sign.

The survey, which involved 2,000 participants, revealed that many early signs of cancer remain under-recognised by the general population. Heartburn and indigestion, often dismissed as minor ailments linked to diet or overeating, were identified as the "least-recognised" symptoms potentially pointing to cancer. Oesophageal cancer claims around 8,000 lives annually in the UK, yet its symptoms are noted by NHS England to be "hard to spot."

Other commonly overlooked cancer indicators included blood in urine, unintentional weight loss, and unexplained lumps on the body. More than half of those surveyed (55 per cent) failed to recognise blood in urine—even if occurring just once—as a possible sign of cancer. Similarly, 49 per cent did not identify unexplained weight loss as a concern, and 42 per cent overlooked lumps that might require medical attention.

Professor Peter Johnson, NHS national cancer director, stressed the importance of being aware of bodily changes. Speaking about the survey findings, he said: "It is so important to know what is normal for you, although we all find a host of other things to think about rather than checking for any changes in our bodies. That's why I want to encourage everyone to make it a part of your routine – finding a way that works for you might just save your life."

He further emphasised the benefit of early diagnosis, encouraging individuals who notice worrying symptoms to consult their GP promptly. "If you do spot something worrying, get in touch with your GP surgery, who can investigate for you. It's unlikely to be cancer, but if there is something wrong, the earlier it is found, the better the chance of treatment being successful."

NHS England provided a comprehensive list of symptoms warranting medical evaluation, including:

* Unexplained lumps anywhere on the body
* Moles that change colour, shape, or start itching, crusting, flaking, or bleeding
* Presence of blood in stool or urine, even once
* Unexpected bleeding such as coughing up blood, bleeding after sex, menopause, or between periods
* Persistent cough or changes to an existing cough lasting three weeks or more
* Mouth sores or ulcers that do not heal
* Continued stomach discomfort or diarrhoea
* Unexplained fatigue
* Persistent heartburn or indigestion
* Unusual stool appearances, such as pale or greasy poo
* Unexplained pain or bloating
* Breathlessness, frequent infections, night sweats, unexplained weight loss, or unexpected bruising

Specific symptoms associated with oesophageal cancer include difficulty swallowing, nausea, vomiting, persistent cough, hoarseness, loss of appetite, throat or chest pain when swallowing, and in less common cases, black stools or coughing up blood.

The NHS underscored that while most symptoms are unlikely to be due to cancer, prompt consultation with a healthcare professional is essential for early detection and improved treatment outcomes. Advances in care, enhanced public awareness, and earlier diagnosis have contributed to more people in the UK surviving cancer than ever before.

The findings and advice were reported by the Get Surrey news outlet, reflecting NHS England’s commitment to raising awareness on cancer symptoms and encouraging timely medical consultation.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2025/04/public-twice-as-likely-check-bank-balance-than-signs-cancer/> - This NHS England article supports the claim that 79% of people do not recognize persistent heartburn lasting three weeks or more as a potential sign of cancer, highlighting it as one of the least-recognised symptoms.
* <https://www.england.nhs.uk/east-of-england/2023/02/09/dont-let-your-heart-burn-on-valentines-day-get-it-checked-experts-warn/> - This source corroborates the statement that oesophageal cancer claims around 8,000 lives annually in the UK, emphasizing its severity and the importance of awareness of symptoms like persistent heartburn.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/be-clear-on-cancer-campaign-highlights-links-between-heartburn-and-cancer> - This government news page details the 'Be Clear on Cancer' campaign, which highlights the link between persistent heartburn and oesophageal cancer, supporting the survey findings that many people are unaware that heartburn can be a cancer symptom.
* <https://heartburncanceruk.org/blog/the-heartburn-health-best4-trials/> - This article on the BEST4 trial supports the mention of ongoing medical research focused on detecting and preventing oesophageal cancer in individuals with persistent heartburn or indigestion.
* <https://gmcancer.org.uk/gmcancernews/dont-ignore-the-burn-nhs-launches-new-cancer-awareness-campaign-in-greater-manchester/> - This news release confirms the NHS campaign encouraging people, especially over 55, to seek medical advice if they experience heartburn or indigestion lasting three weeks or more, aligning with NHS England’s emphasis on early diagnosis.