

Poor public awareness of bowel cancer

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Britons have very low awareness of the signs and symptoms of bowel cancer – the third most common cancer in the UK and second largest cause of cancer deaths each year, new research shows.

The Cancer Research UK-funded study, published today (Tuesday) in [BMC Cancer](#) also found that the public didn't know that lifestyle factors like diet, weight and exercise can affect a person's risk of developing bowel cancer.

The study interviewed over 1,500 members of the British public using the Colorectal/Bowel Cancer [Awareness](#) Measure – a way of assessing awareness of cancer symptoms and risk factors.²

The results showed that on average the public could name just one symptom of bowel cancer and one risk factor. Around 110 people in the UK are diagnosed with bowel cancer every day and about 16,200 people died of the disease in 2008 in the UK.

There was particularly low awareness of lumps in the abdomen and tiredness – both of which are key symptoms that could indicate a cancer is present in the bowel and important for people to be aware of.

Dr. Emily Power, study author, health information manager at Cancer Research UK and researcher at Cancer Research UK's Health Behaviour Centre at UCL, said: "This study reveals that the public's awareness of bowel cancer symptoms is still stubbornly low, particularly among older adults who are at most risk of the disease.

“It also shows there is a long way to go in ensuring people understand the link between having a healthy lifestyle and cancer risk.

“Public health initiatives to increase awareness of risk factors are essential, and not only for lowering cancer risk. Improving attitudes towards healthy behavior can go some way towards reducing other diseases triggered by unhealthy lifestyles.”

Women were more aware of bowel cancer symptoms than men, researchers said. But men were more aware of the importance of maintaining a healthy weight and taking exercise.

Bowel cancer incidence rates for men are 11 per cent higher in the most deprived groups than affluent groups.

Dr. Power said: “If we want to ensure that inequalities in bowel cancer do not increase then it’s crucial to raise awareness of symptoms and risk factors for the disease and ensure people know about available screening programmes, particularly men.”

Although people from a non-White ethnic background tend to have a lower risk of bowel cancer, the study said that this group had less knowledge about bowel cancer symptoms.

Researchers added that the westernisation of diets such as eating more red meat and dairy products – both linked with increased bowel cancer risk - means that raising awareness among these groups is vital.

Sara Hiom, director of health information at Cancer Research UK, said: “Raising awareness about bowel cancer could in turn encourage people to take up their invitation for bowel screening and improve early detection of the disease.

"This is vital if we are to reduce the number of premature deaths from bowel cancer. When the disease is diagnosed at the earliest stage there is an excellent chance of survival.

"Through our work with partners on the National Awareness and Early Diagnosis Initiative (NAEDI), Cancer Research UK aims to improve symptom awareness among the public, encourage prompt visits to the doctor and support GPs to diagnose cancer as early as possible.

"In addition to being symptom aware, small changes to people's daily habits can reduce their risk of developing bowel cancer.

"Keeping a healthy weight, being physically active, eating a diet high in fibre and low in red and processed meat, cutting down on alcohol and not smoking will not only lower your risk of [bowel cancer](#), but of other diseases as well."

More information: Power, E et al., Assessing awareness of colorectal cancer symptoms: Measure development and results from a population survey in the UK, *BioMed Central Cancer* (2011)

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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