

Recognising, investigating and referring people with symptoms of suspected cancer

Information for the public

Published: 25 June 2015

www.nice.org.uk

About this information

NICE guidelines provide advice on the care and support that should be offered to people who use health and care services.

This information explains the advice about suspected cancer that is set out in NICE guideline NG12.

This is an update of advice on referral for suspected cancer that NICE produced in 2005.

Does this information apply to me?

Yes, if you or someone who you care for has symptoms or other problems that could be caused by cancer.

It does not cover people who have already been referred to, or are under the care of, a cancer specialist.

The advice on gender-related cancers applies to people who have changed or are changing gender, and who have the organs of their original gender.

Your care team

A range of professionals who specialise in different areas of care or support may be involved in your care. These could include GPs, nurses, pharmacists and specialists.

Working with you

Your care team should talk with you about your symptoms and what investigations for possible cancer might involve. They should explain any tests or support you should be offered so that you can decide together what is best for you. If you are an adult, your family or carer can be involved in helping to make decisions, but only if you agree. If you are a child or young person, your parent or carer may be involved in helping to make decisions depending on your age. There is a [list of questions](#) you can use to help you talk with your care team.

You may also like to read NICE's information for the public on [patient experience in adult NHS services](#). This sets out what adults should be able to expect when they use the NHS. We also have more information on the NICE website about [using health and social care services](#).

Symptoms that might suggest cancer

There are many different types of cancer, with many different symptoms.

Some symptoms that are caused by cancer affect a particular part of the body, often where the cancer is located, such as lumps and swellings or pain in a particular area, bleeding, or changes to bowel movements. Others are more general, like tiredness and weight loss.

Many other illnesses, which are much more common and less serious than cancer, can

cause the same types of symptoms. This can sometimes make it difficult for healthcare professionals to spot cancer.

This information explains the recommendations that NICE has made to help GPs make decisions about when to refer people to specialists or carry out tests when they present with symptoms that could be caused by cancer. We have organised the possible symptoms of cancer by the area of the body in which they are found. More general symptoms such as weight loss and tiredness, which are not limited to a specific area of the body, are included in the [general symptoms section](#). There is also a separate [section for symptoms of cancer in children and young people](#).

Your GP can check your symptoms, and may carry out tests if they are needed, to see if you should be referred to a cancer specialist.

Being referred to a specialist does not mean that you have cancer. Very few people who are referred to a specialist actually have cancer. However, it is important that you are checked quickly to find out. If you do have cancer, spotting it early can mean treatment is easier and more likely to be successful

Some symptoms may mean that the chances of you having cancer are very low, others may mean the chances are higher, and sometimes a combination of different symptoms may increase your chances of having cancer. Other factors, such as your age and whether you have ever smoked, can also affect your chances of having cancer.

Mouth, throat and neck

Being referred to a specialist does not mean that you have cancer. Very few people who are referred to a specialist actually have cancer. However, it is important that you are checked quickly to find out. If you do have cancer, spotting it early can mean treatment is easier and more likely to be successful.

Lumps in your neck

If you have a lump in your neck and your GP thinks cancer is possible, you may be offered

an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks. If your GP thinks the lump is in your thyroid (a small gland in the neck) the appointment may be to check for thyroid cancer. If you are 45 or over the appointment may be to check for cancer of the voice box (larynx). If the lump is long-lasting, the appointment may be to check for cancer of the mouth.

If you have lumps caused by swollen glands in your neck and your GP thinks cancer is possible, you may be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks to check for lymphoma. This is a cancer of the lymphatic system, which includes things like lymph glands throughout your body that help to fight infection. Your GP will also check if you have any other symptoms of lymphoma, such as fever, night sweats, shortness of breath, itchy skin, weight loss or pain in your glands when you drink alcohol.

If you have swollen lymph glands in other areas of your body as well as in your neck, you may be offered a blood test to check for leukaemia (cancer of the white blood cells) – this should be done within 2 days.

If you are over 40 and have had swollen glands in your neck for longer than normal or they are at the base of your neck, you might get sent for a chest X-ray to check for lung cancer.

Problems swallowing

If you have problems swallowing food and drink, your GP should organise a procedure called an endoscopy for you within 2 weeks. This procedure allows a doctor to take a look inside your throat and stomach to check for any signs of cancer.

Hoarseness

If you are over 45 and are hoarse (your voice is raspy or strained) for longer than would normally be expected if it was caused by something else, your GP might offer you an appointment to see a specialist within 2 weeks to check for cancer of the voice box (larynx).

Lumps, ulcers or other problems in your mouth or lips

If you have a lump on your lip or the inside of your mouth, or a red or red and white patch on the inside of your mouth, your GP may refer you to see a dentist within 2 weeks. If the dentist thinks that cancer of the mouth is possible, they may offer you an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks.

You may also be offered an appointment to see a specialist within 2 weeks if you have had a mouth ulcer (a sore inside your mouth) for more than 3 weeks and your GP doesn't think it is caused by anything else.

Breasts and armpits

Being referred to a specialist does not mean that you have cancer. Very few people who are referred to a specialist actually have cancer. However, it is important that you are checked quickly to find out. If you do have cancer, spotting it early can mean treatment is easier and more likely to be successful

Lumps or changes in your breasts (in women and men)

You should be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks if you are:

- 50 or over and have changes to one of your nipples that worry you, such as discharge from the nipple or the nipple appearing to be pulled inwards (sometimes called retraction or inversion)
- 30 or over and have a lump in your breast that isn't caused by anything else.

You may also be offered an appointment to see a specialist within 2 weeks if you have changes to the skin on your breast, such as puckering or dimpling.

If you are under 30 and have a lump in your breast that isn't caused by anything else, you might be offered an appointment to see a specialist, although not necessarily within

2 weeks. Your GP may get advice from a specialist about whether to refer you.

Lumps in your armpits

If you are 30 or over and have a lump in your armpit that your GP doesn't think is caused by anything else, you may be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist to check for breast cancer within 2 weeks.

If you have lumps in your armpit caused by swollen glands and your GP doesn't think they are caused by another problem, you may be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks to check for lymphoma. This is a cancer of the lymphatic system, which includes things like lymph glands throughout the body that help to fight infection. Your GP will also check if you have any other symptoms of lymphoma, such as fever, night sweats, shortness of breath, itchy skin, weight loss or pain in your glands when you drink alcohol.

If you also have swollen lymph glands in other areas of your body as well as in your armpits, you may be offered a blood test to check for leukaemia (cancer of the white blood cells) – this should be done within 2 days.

Chest

Being referred to a specialist does not mean that you have cancer. Very few people who are referred to a specialist actually have cancer. However, it is important that you are checked quickly to find out. If you do have cancer, spotting it early can mean treatment is easier and more likely to be successful.

Problems with your chest and lungs

Some chest symptoms, such as cough and shortness of breath, are common and have many different causes. However, you may be offered checks for possible cancer if your GP doesn't think they are caused by anything else, depending on your age, if you have other symptoms or have ever smoked.

You should be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks to check

for lung cancer if:

- you have had a chest X-ray and the results suggest you might have lung cancer or
- you are 40 or over and coughing up blood, and your GP doesn't think it is caused by anything else.

You should be offered a chest X-ray, which should be carried out within 2 weeks, to check for lung cancer or a type of cancer called mesothelioma (which can affect the lining of the lungs and chest) if you are 40 or over, have 2 or more of the following symptoms and your GP doesn't think that they are caused by anything else:

- cough
- shortness of breath
- chest pain
- tiredness
- weight loss
- appetite loss.

If you have ever smoked and are 40 or over you should also be offered a chest X-ray, which should be carried out within 2 weeks, to check for lung cancer or mesothelioma if you have a cough, shortness of breath or chest pain and your GP doesn't think that it is caused by anything else. If you have any of these symptoms, are 40 or over and have been exposed to asbestos you should also be offered a chest X-ray, which should be carried out within 2 weeks, to check for mesothelioma.

You might also be offered a chest X-ray to check for lung cancer or mesothelioma, which should be carried out within 2 weeks, if you are 40 or over and:

- your GP examines you and finds signs that lung disease or cancer are possible or
- you have had a chest infection that you can't seem to get rid of or keeps coming back after treatment.

For more information on chest X-rays see test results.

Abdomen, stomach, bowels and bottom

Being referred to a specialist does not mean that you have cancer. Very few people who are referred to a specialist actually have cancer. However, it is important that you are checked quickly to find out. If you do have cancer, spotting it early can mean treatment is easier and more likely to be successful.

This section includes symptoms affecting your abdomen (the area between your chest and pelvis), and your stomach and bowels (which are involved in digestion). This area has many important organs, including some involved in digesting food and, for women, some involved in reproduction (the womb and ovaries). Symptoms in this part of the body can be for many different cancers.

For information about abdominal symptoms in children and young people see the [symptoms of cancer in children and young people section](#).

Lumps or swelling in your abdomen

If you have a lump or swelling in your abdomen, you might be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks. Whether or not you are offered this appointment and which type of cancer they will check for will depend on other symptoms you have. For example, if your GP thinks your lump is being caused by a swollen spleen, you might be referred to check for a type of cancer called non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, but this might depend on other symptoms that you have. If your lump is in the upper part of the abdomen and your GP thinks stomach cancer is possible, then you might be referred to check for this.

If you are a woman and your GP examines your abdomen and finds a lump, and doesn't think it is caused by fibroids (non-cancerous growths) in your womb, you should be referred to see a specialist within 2 weeks to check for cancer of the ovaries.

If your GP thinks the lump is caused by swelling of both the liver and spleen, you may be offered a blood test to check for leukaemia (cancer of the white blood cells) – this blood test, called a full blood count, should be carried out within 2 days.

If the lump or swelling is just in the upper part of your abdomen, and your GP thinks this

might be being caused by an enlarged liver or [gall bladder](#), you may be offered a scan to check for any signs of cancer in these organs. This should be carried out within 2 weeks.

Pain or bloating in your abdomen

You should be offered an appointment with a specialist within 2 weeks to check for cancer of the [colon](#) or [rectum](#) (parts of your intestine) if you are 40 or over, have pain in your abdomen and have weight loss that can't be explained by anything else. If you have these symptoms but are 60 or over, you might be offered a scan to check for cancer of the [pancreas](#) (an important gland that helps digestion and produces insulin) – the scan should take place within 2 weeks. If you are 55 or over with these symptoms but the pain is only in the upper part of your abdomen, you should be offered a procedure (called an [endoscopy](#)) within 2 weeks to look inside your throat and stomach for any signs of cancer. You might also be offered this procedure if you have had abnormal blood test results or have been feeling or being sick as well as being in pain.

If you have pain in your abdomen and also have visible bleeding from your bottom, you may be offered an appointment with a specialist within 2 weeks. However, if you have pain but don't have any visible bleeding from your bottom, and you are 50 or over, you should be offered a test to check for traces of blood in your faeces (also called stools) – this can help check for possible cancer of the colon or rectum.

If you are a woman and have pain or bloating in your abdomen that is long-lasting or happens often (particularly if this happens more than 12 times a month), or you are 50 or over with symptoms of [irritable bowel syndrome](#) (which include pain, bloating and changes to bowel movements) that started within the past year, you should be offered a blood test (called a [CA125](#) test) to check for cancer of the ovaries. This test will probably be carried out at your GP surgery, and is particularly important if you are 50 or over.

For more information on tests for blood in your faeces (stools) or a CA125 test see [test results](#).

Indigestion, reflux, feeling or being sick, or vomiting blood

Stomach symptoms, such as reflux (when a feeling of acid burning spreads upwards in the chest), indigestion (also called dyspepsia) or feeling or being sick, are common. However,

your GP may want to carry out checks for cancer of the stomach or oesophagus (food pipe) if they don't think your symptoms are caused by something else, and depending on your age and other symptoms you might have.

You should be offered a procedure (called an endoscopy) to look inside your throat and stomach if you are 55 or over, have reflux or indigestion, and you have lost weight – the procedure should be done within 2 weeks. You might also be offered the procedure (although not necessarily within 2 weeks) if you are vomiting blood or you are 55 or over and have any of the following:

- indigestion that hasn't gone away after treatment
- stomach symptoms and blood test results that have come back abnormal
- feeling or being sick with weight loss or other stomach symptoms.

If you are 60 or over, have lost weight and you have been feeling sick or being sick, your GP may offer you a scan to check for cancer of the pancreas – this scan should be carried out within 2 weeks.

Problems with your bottom or bowel movements

Changes in your bowel movements include diarrhoea, constipation and other changes to the usual timing, size, amount, consistency and frequency of your bowel movements. These symptoms are common, but you may be referred or offered checks for possible cancer if your GP doesn't think they are caused by anything else, especially if you also have other symptoms or you are 60 or over.

If you are 60 or over and have changes in your bowel movements and your GP doesn't think they are caused by anything else, you should be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks to check for cancer of the colon or rectum (parts of your intestine). If the changes to your bowel movements are diarrhoea or constipation and you have also lost weight, you may be offered a scan to check for cancer of the pancreas – this scan should happen within 2 weeks. However, if you are under 60 and your bowel movements have changed, you should be offered a test to check for traces of blood in your faeces (also called stools).

If you are a woman with symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome (which include changes to bowel movements and pain and bloating in the abdomen) that started within the past year

and you are 50 or over, you should be offered a blood test (called a CA125 test) to check for cancer of the ovaries. You might also be offered this test if you have changes to your bowel movements, regardless of your age.

If you are 50 or over and have bleeding from your bottom and your GP doesn't think it is caused by anything else, you should be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks to check for cancer of the colon or rectum. If you are under 50, you may be offered this appointment if you also have other symptoms, such as pain in your abdomen, changes to your bowel movements, weight loss or [anaemia](#) (caused by loss of blood). You might also be offered this appointment if you have a sore or a lump inside your bottom. The appointment might be to check for cancer of the colon or rectum or of the [anus](#), depending on where inside your bottom the symptoms are.

For more information on tests for blood in your faeces (stools) or a CA125 test see [test results](#).

Back and bones

Being referred to a specialist does not mean that you have cancer. Very few people who are referred to a specialist actually have cancer. However, it is important that you are checked quickly to find out. If you do have cancer, spotting it early can mean treatment is easier and more likely to be successful.

Back pain is common and may be caused by a number of things, but if you are 60 or over and you have lost weight, and your GP doesn't think it is caused by anything else, you may be offered a scan to check for cancer of the [pancreas](#) (an important gland that helps digestion and produces insulin) – this scan should be carried out within 2 weeks.

If you are 60 or over and have bone pain (particularly back pain) that is long-lasting or you have had a fracture that wasn't caused by anything else (such as an accident), you should be offered blood tests to check for myeloma (a type of cancer that affects white blood cells and the bone marrow where blood cells are made). For more information see [test results](#).

For bone symptoms in children and young people see the [symptoms of cancer in children and young people section](#).

Groin and pelvis (including genitals and urinary organs)

Being referred to a specialist does not mean that you have cancer. Very few people who are referred to a specialist actually have cancer. However, it is important that you are checked quickly to find out. If you do have cancer, spotting it early can mean treatment is easier and more likely to be successful.

This section includes symptoms affecting your groin and pelvis (the area from your hips to the top of your legs). This area has many important organs, including the genitals and those involved in urinating. Symptoms in this part of the body can be for many different cancers.

For information about urinary symptoms in children and young people see the [symptoms of cancer in children and young people section](#).

Problems with urinating or blood in your urine

Problems with urinating include pain when you urinate, feeling a sudden need to urinate or needing to urinate more often than usual, finding it difficult to start urinating or not being able to empty your bladder fully, and needing to urinate more often during the night. These symptoms are common and may be caused by a number of other things, but you may be offered checks for possible cancer if your GP doesn't think they are caused by anything else.

If you are 45 or over, have visible blood in your urine and you don't have a urinary infection or you have had an infection but the bleeding continues after it is treated, you should be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks to check for kidney or bladder cancer. You should also be offered this appointment to check for bladder cancer if you are 60 or over, tests show that you have traces of blood in your urine and you have either pain when you urinate or blood test results that are abnormal.

If you are a woman aged 55 or over with visible blood in your urine and either a vaginal discharge that your GP doesn't think is caused by anything else or blood test results that are abnormal, your GP may offer you a scan to check for endometrial cancer (cancer of the

lining of the womb).

If you are a woman and you find that you are needing to urinate more often than usual or you have a sudden need to urinate, and these symptoms are long-lasting or happen often (particularly if this happens more than 12 times a month), you should be offered a blood test (called a [CA125](#) test) to check for cancer of the ovaries. This test will probably be carried out at your GP surgery, and is particularly important if you are 50 or over.

If you are a man with urinary problems or visible blood in your urine, you may be offered a blood test (called a [prostate-specific antigen](#) test or PSA test for short) and a [rectal examination](#) to check for [prostate](#) cancer.

For more information on PSA and CA125 tests see [test results](#).

Lumps or pain in your pelvis

If you are a woman and your GP examines your pelvis and finds a lump, and doesn't think it is caused by fibroids (non-cancerous growths) in your womb, you should be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks to check for cancer of the ovaries. If you have pain in your pelvic area (below your belly button) that happens often or is long-lasting, you should be offered a blood test (called a CA125 test) to check for cancer of the ovaries. For more information see [test results](#).

Lumps in your groin

If you have lumps caused by swollen glands in your groin and your GP doesn't think they are caused by another problem, you may be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks to check for lymphoma. This is a cancer of the lymphatic system, which includes things like [lymph glands](#) throughout your body that help to fight infection. Your GP will also check if you also have other symptoms of lymphoma, such as fever, night sweats, shortness of breath, itchy skin, weight loss or pain in your glands when you drink alcohol.

If you also have swollen lymph glands in other areas of your body as well as in your groin, you may be offered a blood test to check for leukaemia (cancer of the white blood cells) – this should be done within 2 days.

Problems with your vagina, vulva or cervix

If you are 55 or over and you have vaginal bleeding that happens more than 12 months after the menopause, your GP should offer you an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks to check for endometrial cancer (cancer of the lining of the womb). If you are under 55 with these symptoms you might also be offered this appointment.

If you are 55 or over and have vaginal discharge that your GP doesn't think is caused by anything else, and it is a new symptom or you also have abnormal blood test results or visible blood in your urine, your GP may organise a scan for you to check for endometrial cancer.

If you have a lump in or at the entrance to your vagina, or a lump or sore on your vulva (the outer parts of women's genitals), or bleeding from your vulva and your GP doesn't think it is caused by anything else, you may be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks to check for cancer of the vagina or vulva.

If your GP examines your cervix (the entrance to the womb from the vagina) and thinks that cancer might be possible, you may be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks.

Problems with your penis, testicles or getting an erection

If you have a lump or sore on your penis that isn't caused by a sexually transmitted infection or that continues after treatment for a sexually transmitted infection, you should be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks to check for cancer of the penis. You might also be offered this appointment if the end of your penis or foreskin is sore or swollen and your GP doesn't think it is caused by anything else or your symptoms are long-lasting.

If your testicles are swollen or if they have changed in shape or how they feel, but aren't painful, you should be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks to check for cancer of the testicles. If you have other changes to your testicles, and your GP doesn't think they are caused by anything else or your symptoms are long-lasting, you may be offered a scan to check for cancer.

If you have problems getting an erection, you may be offered a blood test (called a [prostate-specific antigen](#) test or PSA test for short) and a [rectal examination](#) to check for [prostate](#) cancer. For more information see [test results](#).

Skin and soft tissue

Being referred to a specialist does not mean that you have cancer. Very few people who are referred to a specialist actually have cancer. However, it is important that you are checked quickly to find out. If you do have cancer, spotting it early can mean treatment is easier and more likely to be successful.

Jaundice

Jaundice occurs when there is a build-up of a substance called bilirubin in the blood and body's tissues. Symptoms include a yellowing of the skin and eyes. If you are 40 or over and your GP has assessed you as having jaundice, you should be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks to check for cancer of the [pancreas](#).

Bruising, rash or unusual paleness

If you have bruising or a skin rash of small red or purple spots (known as petechiae) or pallor (unusual paleness of the skin), and your GP doesn't think anything else is causing it, you may be offered a blood test (carried out within 2 days) to check for leukaemia (which is cancer of the white blood cells).

Skin lesions

Skin lesions, which include damaged or injured patches of skin, or new, large, changing or unusual looking moles, may sometimes be symptoms of skin cancer.

If you have a skin lesion and your GP has assessed it (checking its shape, size, any change in size and any other features) or carried out a skin examination using a special magnifying tool called a dermoscope, and thinks that a type of skin cancer called melanoma might be possible, you should be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks. You might also be offered this appointment if your GP thinks a type of skin cancer called

nodular melanoma or squamous cell carcinoma is possible.

If you have a skin lesion and your GP thinks a type of cancer called basal cell carcinoma might be possible, you may be offered a referral to have it checked by a specialist (although not necessarily within 2 weeks). This type of cancer tends to develop slowly, so you should only be offered an appointment to be seen within 2 weeks if your GP is worried that a delay might cause problems because of the size or position of the lesion.

For information about skin symptoms in children and young people see the [symptoms of cancer in children and young people section](#).

Soft tissue lumps

Soft tissue is the supporting tissue of the body, including fat, muscles, tendons, ligaments and blood vessels. A rare type of cancer called a soft tissue sarcoma can occur in these tissues, most commonly in the arms and legs.

If you have a lump in your soft tissue that is getting bigger, and your GP doesn't think it is caused by anything else, you may be offered a scan (carried out within 2 weeks) to check for soft tissue sarcoma. For more information see [test results](#).

General symptoms

Being referred to a specialist does not mean that you have cancer. Very few people who are referred to a specialist actually have cancer. However, it is important that you are checked quickly to find out. If you do have cancer, spotting it early can mean treatment is easier and more likely to be successful.

Some symptoms that might be caused by cancer are not specific to a body area. Some of these general symptoms can be caused by many different cancers, whereas others can be related to a particular cancer. Sometimes general symptoms occur alongside other symptoms or signs of cancer.

In particular, the following general symptoms may sometimes be caused by cancer if they can't be explained by another cause:

- weight loss
- loss of appetite
- a swollen and painful leg caused by a blood clot deep inside a vein (called deep vein thrombosis or DVT).

If you have any of these symptoms, your GP should check for any other symptoms or signs that might be caused by a particular cancer. If you have weight loss or appetite loss, you should be offered investigations or an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks. You might also be offered an appointment if you have a DVT that cannot be explained by another cause.

Other general symptoms that may sometimes be of concern if they can't be explained by another cause include severe tiredness, fever and infection that is long-lasting or keeps returning.

If you have tiredness, weight loss or appetite loss that your GP doesn't think is caused by anything else, and you have ever smoked and are 40 or over, you should be offered a chest X-ray, which should be carried out within 2 weeks, to check for lung cancer or a type of cancer called mesothelioma (which can affect the lining of the lungs and chest). You should also be offered it if you have these symptoms, are 40 or over and have been exposed to asbestos, to check for mesothelioma.

You should also be offered a chest X-ray, which should be carried out within 2 weeks, to check for lung cancer or mesothelioma if you are 40 or over, have 2 or more of the following symptoms and your GP doesn't think that they are caused by anything else:

- cough
- shortness of breath
- chest pain
- tiredness
- weight loss
- appetite loss.

You may be offered a blood test (carried out within 2 days) to check for leukaemia (which

is cancer of the white blood cells) if you have long-lasting tiredness, a fever, bleeding or an infection that hasn't got better or keeps returning and your GP doesn't think it is caused by anything else.

You may be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks to check for lymphoma (this is cancer of the lymphatic system, which includes things like your [lymph glands](#) that help to fight infection) if you have swollen glands. Your GP will also take into account if you have other general symptoms, such as fever, night sweats, itchy skin, weight loss or pain in your lymph glands when you drink alcohol, which might help them decide whether to refer you.

If you are 50 or over and have weight loss and you don't have any visible bleeding from your bottom, you should be offered a test to check for traces of blood in your faeces (also called stools) – this can help check for possible cancer of the [colon](#) or [rectum](#). For more information see [test results](#).

If you are a woman with weight loss or tiredness that isn't caused by anything else, you may be offered a blood test (called a [CA125](#) test) to check for cancer of the ovaries. For more information see [test results](#).

Some general symptoms are caused by problems with the brain and nervous system. If you are having problems with movement and balance, your memory and thinking, or with pain and tiredness and your GP has assessed you and thinks that you have problems with your nervous system that are gradually worsening, you may be offered a scan (to be carried out within 2 weeks) to check for cancer of the brain or central nervous system.

Test results

Being referred to a specialist does not mean that you have cancer. Very few people who are referred to a specialist actually have cancer. However, it is important that you are checked quickly to find out. If you do have cancer, spotting it early can mean treatment is easier and more likely to be successful.

Sometimes blood tests, X-rays or ultrasound scans suggest cancer may be possible. Some of these tests may be done by your GP as part of a general health check or to check for cancer.

Blood test results

If you have a blood test and your test results suggest that cancer might be a possible cause, you may be offered further tests or investigations, or an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks. Whether you are offered an investigation or an appointment will depend on the type of blood test result (for example, abnormal red or white blood cell levels, high platelet levels, high glucose levels or high calcium levels may sometimes suggest cancer) and other factors that might affect your risk of cancer, such as your age and whether you have any symptoms of cancer.

Prostate cancer

If you have a prostate-specific antigen (PSA) test that suggests prostate cancer is possible, you should be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks.

Ovarian cancer

If you have a test to check for ovarian cancer (called a CA125 test) that suggests that ovarian cancer is possible, you should be offered a scan of your abdomen and pelvis. You should be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks if your scan results show that ovarian cancer is possible. If your CA125 result is normal, your GP should check for other causes of your symptoms and, if no cause can be found, you should be advised when to return if your symptoms persist or happen more often.

Myeloma

If you have blood tests that suggest myeloma (a type of cancer that affects white blood cells and the bone marrow where blood cells are made) is possible, you should be offered further blood tests (called protein electrophoresis) and a urine test (called a Bence-Jones protein test) to check for chemicals (particular types of protein) that are produced by myeloma cancer cells. These further tests should be carried out within 2 days. If these tests also show that myeloma is possible, you should be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks.

Faeces (stool) test results

If you have symptoms of possible cancer of the colon or rectum, and tests have found

traces of blood in your faeces (stools), you should be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks to check for cancer of the colon or rectum.

X-ray results

If you have had an X-ray that suggests lung cancer, mesothelioma (which can affect the lining of the lungs and chest) or bone sarcoma is possible, you should be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks.

Ultrasound scan results

If an ultrasound scan of your abdomen and pelvis suggests that ovarian cancer is possible, you should be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks. If your ultrasound scan is normal but you have a high CA125 result, your GP should check for other causes of your symptoms and, if no cause can be found, you should be advised when to return if your symptoms persist or happen more often.

If an ultrasound scan suggests that soft tissue sarcoma is possible, or if the scan results are uncertain and there is still concern that cancer is possible, you may be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 weeks.

Symptoms of cancer in children and young people

Being referred to a specialist does not mean that you have cancer. Very few people who are referred to a specialist actually have cancer. However, it is important that you are checked quickly to find out. If you do have cancer, spotting it early can mean treatment is easier and more likely to be successful.

The types of cancer that affect children and young people can be quite different from those in adults. Some cancers, such as neuroblastoma, retinoblastoma and Wilms' tumour affect mainly young children (under 5). Others, such as leukaemia, lymphoma, sarcoma and brain or central nervous system cancer, can affect people of any age. This section includes information for children (under 16) and young people (under 24). Some young people may be offered adult tests and referrals; this will depend on their age, the type of

cancer suspected and the services in the local area.

Cancer in children and young people is rare. It can be very difficult to spot because many of the symptoms are the same as those for less serious conditions. If your child has symptoms that you are concerned about, the GP should take into account your concerns and your knowledge of your child. Your child may be offered an appointment with a specialist (such as a paediatrician) if you continue to have concerns about their symptoms, even if it's very unlikely that cancer is the cause.

If the GP thinks that your child should be referred to a specialist to check for possible cancer, they should discuss the decision with you and your child, if appropriate, and discuss with you the information that should be given to your child.

Lumps or swellings

Abdomen

If your child or a young person has a lump or swelling in their abdomen (the part of the body between the chest and hips) and the GP thinks it is caused by a swollen liver and spleen, they should be offered an appointment to see a specialist immediately (within a few hours) to check for leukaemia (which is cancer of the white blood cells). If the GP thinks it is caused by a swollen spleen only, they may be offered an appointment to see a specialist within 2 days to check for lymphoma (cancer of the lymphatic system, which includes things like the lymph glands that help to fight infection). The GP will also check for other symptoms, such as fever, night sweats, shortness of breath, itchy skin, or weight loss that can't be explained by anything else, which might help them decide whether to refer them.

If your child has a lump or swelling in their abdomen and the GP doesn't think it is caused by anything else, they may be offered an appointment to see a specialist within 2 days to check for neuroblastoma (which is a cancer of the nervous system) or Wilms' tumour (a type of kidney cancer).

Neck, armpits and groin

If your child or a young person has lumps caused by swollen glands in their neck, armpits or groin, and the GP doesn't think they are caused by another problem, they may be

offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 days to check for lymphoma. The GP will also check if they have other symptoms of lymphoma, such as fever, night sweats, shortness of breath, itchy skin or weight loss.

More than one body area

If they have swollen lymph glands in more than one body area, they may be offered a blood test to check for leukaemia (cancer of the white blood cells) – this should be done within 2 days.

Soft tissue

Soft tissue is the soft, supporting tissue of the body, including fat, muscles, tendons, ligaments and blood vessels. A rare type of cancer called a soft tissue sarcoma can occur in these tissues, most commonly in the arms and legs. If your child or a young person has a lump in their soft tissue that is getting bigger, and the GP doesn't think it is caused by anything else, they may be offered a scan (carried out within 2 days) to check for soft tissue sarcoma. If an ultrasound scan suggests that soft tissue sarcoma is possible, or if the scan results are uncertain and there is still concern that cancer is possible, your child or the young person may be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 days.

Blood in the urine

If your child has blood in their urine that can't be explained by another cause, the GP may offer them an appointment to see a specialist within 2 days to check for Wilms' tumour.

Bruising, unusual paleness or rash

If your child or a young person has a skin rash of small red or purple spots (known as petechiae), and the GP doesn't think it is caused by anything else, they should be offered an immediate appointment (within a few hours) with a specialist to check for leukaemia.

If your child or a young person has bruising that isn't caused by anything else (such as an injury) or an unusual paleness to their skin (pallor), they should be offered a blood test, which should be done within 2 days, to check for leukaemia.

Bone pain or swelling

If your child or a young person has bone pain that is long-lasting, they should be offered a blood test, which should be done within 2 days, to check for leukaemia.

If they have bone pain or swelling and the GP doesn't think it is caused by anything else, they may be offered an X-ray, which should be done within 2 days, to check for bone sarcoma (a rare type of bone cancer). If the X-ray suggests bone sarcoma is possible, they may be offered an appointment with a specialist within 2 days.

Eye check results

Your child might have an eye check as part of a developmental check, or because you are worried about your child's eyes or sight. As part of the check your GP may use an instrument called an ophthalmoscope to see inside your child's eye and check the 'red reflex' (which is the red-coloured reflection of light from inside the eye).

If your child does not have a red reflex in one or both eyes, your GP may offer them an appointment to see an eye specialist (an ophthalmologist) within 2 weeks to do further checks for a type of eye cancer called retinoblastoma.

General symptoms

Some symptoms that might be caused by cancer are not specific to a body area, such as weight loss, severe tiredness or fever. Sometimes general symptoms occur alongside other symptoms or signs of cancer.

Your child or a young person may be offered a blood test (carried out within 2 days) to check for leukaemia if they have long-lasting tiredness, a fever, bleeding or an infection that hasn't got better or keeps returning and the GP doesn't think they are caused by anything else.

Your child or a young person may be offered an appointment to see a cancer specialist within 2 days to check for lymphoma if they have swollen lymph glands. The GP will also take into account if they have other, general symptoms such as fever, night sweats, itchy skin or weight loss, which might help them decide whether to refer them.

Some general symptoms are caused by problems with the brain and nervous system. If your child or a young person has problems with their movements, strength, balance and coordination, or confusion and tiredness, and the GP has assessed them and thinks that they might have a new problem with their brain or central nervous system, they may be offered an appointment to see a specialist within 2 days to check for cancer.

If you are referred for suspected cancer

Being referred to a specialist does not mean that you have cancer. Very few people who are referred to a specialist actually have cancer. However, it is important that you are checked quickly to find out. If you do have cancer, spotting it early can mean treatment is easier and more likely to be successful

Being referred for suspected cancer can be worrying. If you or someone you are caring for is being referred, your GP should explain to you that most people who are referred will not have cancer. They should discuss any other conditions that may be causing the symptoms.

You should be given information tailored to your needs about the possible diagnosis. Your GP should also explain how you can get more information before your appointment and give you details of local and national support. The information you are given should be in a suitable format and language for you, and should take into account your cultural needs.

You and your family members or carer should be given information about:

- where you are being referred
- how soon the appointment will be
- what you can expect to happen at your appointment and what tests might be carried out
- how long it will be before you get test results or a diagnosis
- whether someone can go with you to the appointment.

While you are waiting for your appointment, your GP should continue to provide support and ask you to contact them again if you have any concerns or questions.

With your agreement, your GP should tell the specialist if you need any extra help because of your personal circumstances.

If you have some possible symptoms of cancer but have not been referred

If you are worried that you may have cancer, your GP should reassure you that your current symptoms mean that your chances of having cancer are low.

If you have any symptom that could be caused by cancer, but your GP thinks it is unlikely, they should explain that the risk of cancer is low, but that you should come back for another assessment if your symptoms change. Your GP should explain to you what to look out for, such as other symptoms or changes to your current symptoms, and when you should return for re-evaluation. They may give you written information about this.

Your GP may also offer you an appointment to review your symptoms. This might be a planned appointment after a certain period of time or carried out when you return because of your symptoms (for example, if they continue, get worse or come back), if you develop new symptoms or if you are still worried.

Questions to ask about suspected cancer

Being referred to a specialist does not mean that you have cancer. Very few people who are referred to a specialist actually have cancer. However, it is important that you are checked quickly to find out. If you do have cancer, spotting it early can mean treatment is easier and more likely to be successful.

These questions, and others of your own, may help you discuss your symptoms or the investigations or referral you have been offered with your healthcare team.

About your symptoms

- Can you tell me more about my symptoms and what might be causing them?

Tests and investigations

- Can you tell me more about the tests or investigations you've offered me?
- What do these tests involve?
- Where will these be carried out? Will I need to have them in hospital?
- How long will I have to wait until I have these tests?
- How long will it take to get the results of these tests?

Referral to a cancer specialist

- Why have I been referred to a cancer specialist? Do I have cancer?
- What will happen at the appointment with the cancer specialist?
- What tests or investigations will I need?

Support and information

- Are there any support organisations in my local area?
- Can you provide any information for my family/carers?

For family members, friends or carers

- What can I/we do to help and support the person with suspected cancer?
- Is there any additional support that I/we as carer(s) might benefit from or be entitled to?

Terms explained

Abdomen

The part of the body between the chest and the pelvis. It contains many of the body's

organs, such as the stomach, intestine, liver and kidneys.

Anaemia

A blood condition in which there are fewer red blood cells than normal or there is an abnormally low amount of haemoglobin (a chemical that carries oxygen in the blood) in each red blood cell.

Anus

The opening at the end of your bowel.

Asbestos

An insulating material used widely in industry and construction from the mid-1940s. Exposure to asbestos fibres can cause lung disease, including a type of cancer called mesothelioma (which can affect the lining of the lungs and chest).

CA125

A protein that most women have in their blood. The level of CA125 may be higher in women with ovarian cancer because it is sometimes produced by ovarian cancer cells. However, the level of CA125 can also be raised in women who have other conditions.

Colon

The longest part of the large bowel, ending just before the rectum and anus.

Endoscopy

An examination using an endoscope, which is a small flexible tube with a light and a camera at one end.

Gall bladder

Part of the digestive system that stores bile, which helps to break down fats.

Genitals

The sex organs, both inside (internal) and outside (external) of the body, including the vulva, vagina and cervix in women, and the penis and testicles in men.

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)

A common gut disorder that does not always have a known cause. Symptoms include abdominal pain or discomfort that can be relieved by going to the toilet (passing stools), changes in bowel habit (constipation or diarrhoea) and abdominal bloating.

Lymph glands

A network of glands found throughout the body that are involved in fighting infection and cancer.

Oesophagus

The tube that carries food and drink from your mouth to your stomach (also known as the food pipe or gullet).

Pancreas

A gland in the abdomen that produces enzymes to help digest food and also some hormones that help to control blood sugar.

Pelvis

The part of the body between the abdomen and the thighs.

Prostate

A small gland near a man's bladder that produces a fluid that carries the man's sperm when he ejaculates. When a man has prostate cancer, the cells in the prostate gland grow in an uncontrolled way and form lumps (also known as tumours).

Prostate-specific antigen (PSA)

A protein found in the blood. The PSA level in the blood is often higher in men with prostate cancer, but a higher PSA level does not necessarily mean you have prostate cancer.

Spleen

A small organ that is part of the immune system, involved in producing white blood cells and removing red blood cells.

Rectal examination

An examination in which a doctor or nurse inserts a finger into the rectum to feel for abnormalities, for example to check for changes to the prostate gland.

Rectum

The last part of the large bowel, closest to the anus.

Vulva

The external part of women's genitals.

Sources of advice and support

- [Macmillan Cancer Support](#), 0808 808 0000
- [Cancer Research UK](#), 0808 800 4040

- [Teenage Cancer Trust, mailto:hello@teenagecancertrust.org](mailto:hello@teenagecancertrust.org)
- [Rarer Cancers Foundation, 0800 334 5551](https://www.rarer-cancers.org/)

You can also go to [NHS Choices](https://www.nhs.uk/choices/) for more information.

NICE is not responsible for the quality or accuracy of any information or advice provided by these organisations.

Other NICE guidance

- [Irritable bowel syndrome in adults \(2015\) NICE guideline CG61](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG61)
- [Patient experience in adult NHS services \(2012\) NICE guidance CG138](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG138)
- [Ovarian cancer \(2011\) NICE guideline CG122](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG122)
- [Improving outcomes for people with skin tumours including melanoma \(2010\) NICE guideline CSG8](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CSG8)

Update information

May 2021: We updated some information on when you might have a test if you have a pain in your abdomen but no bleeding from your bottom, or if you have changes in your bowel movements.

ISBN: 978-1-4731-1165-3

Accreditation

