


**LIFE SHOULDN'T
BE HARD TO
SWALLOW**



PHARMACISTS INFORMATION PACK

This pack is for pharmacists in Wales to help support patients to identify symptoms of oesophageal and stomach (oesophago-gastric) cancer earlier.

Please use the campaign materials accordingly:

Information Pack - Short briefing document about the oesophago-gastric cancer awareness campaign which can serve as training for the whole pharmacy team.

Information Cards - Small postcard to hand to customers who regularly purchase indigestion and heartburn medication, or who ask for information on seeing the poster.

Symptom Awareness Poster - Poster to be displayed somewhere with good visibility to customers e.g. shop window.

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BACKGROUND

Oesophageal and Stomach Cancer in Wales

Upper gastrointestinal cancers (gastric, liver, oesophagus, and pancreas) make up four of the six cancers with the worst survival outcomes. Of these, oesophageal and stomach cancer have extremely poor prognosis, with only 43% and 41% of patients in Wales expected to survive more than one-year post-diagnosis respectively (WCISU, 2022). **Lack of awareness surrounding oesophago-gastric cancer symptoms, resulting in late diagnosis, is a key factor attributed to these alarmingly low survival rates.**

Symptoms of oesophago-gastric cancer can be vague and, as medication for symptoms such as heartburn and indigestion is readily available without prescription, help-seeking is often delayed.

Symptoms

Symptoms of oesophageal and stomach cancer include:

- persistent dyspepsia (3 weeks or more)
- prolonged heartburn (3 weeks or more)
- difficulty swallowing
- unexplained weight loss
- fatigue
- abdominal pain
- nausea and vomiting



Risk Factors

Non-modifiable risk factors for gastro-oesophageal cancer include age and sex (incidence is 2 times higher in males).

Modifiable risk factors include smoking and being overweight (BMI greater than 25).

The latter factors are closely linked to increasing levels of socioeconomic deprivation in Wales. Deprivation in general has been associated with greater incidence of cancer-related mortality.

Scan the QR code to read our full report
A Burning Issue: Oesophageal and stomach cancer in Wales



THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY PHARMACY

Raising Awareness

A recent survey conducted on behalf of the Less Survivable Cancers Taskforce revealed only 1% and 4% of people surveyed recognised the symptoms of oesophageal and stomach cancer, respectively. Compare this to a more identifiable cancer such as breast, which has around a 40% symptom awareness.

The aim of this campaign is to raise awareness of oesophago-gastric cancer symptoms to increase early diagnosis so patients will have better treatment outcomes.

It is hoped by training the pharmacy team on oesophago-gastric cancer and displaying the campaign materials, pharmacies can enable people to become aware of the potential cancerous link to non-specific symptoms.

What can you do?

Encouraging Help-Seeking Behaviour

There has been a general decrease in help-seeking behaviour in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and public awareness of pressures on the NHS, making it more imperative than ever that people with oesophago-gastric cancer symptoms feel assured their GPs are willing to see them.

Pharmacies are well-placed to open a dialogue with people at risk for oesophago-gastric cancers and encourage them to seek help.

Socioeconomically deprived communities are disproportionately affected by oesophago-gastric cancer and pharmacies represent an accessible point of healthcare information for such communities. People with prolonged indigestion and heartburn are also likely to self-medicate, so the pharmacy team may notice local customers who regularly buy medication for these symptoms and recommend they consult their GP.



When people buy heartburn or indigestion medicine, start a simple conversation to ask if they have experienced the symptoms for more than 3 weeks, and offer a gentle recommendation to speak to their GP.

Whilst some people do not want to bother their GP with a symptom they may view as inconsequential, such as heartburn, it is important not to cause too much fear of cancer, which may itself reduce the likelihood of help-seeking behaviour.

WHAT TO SAY

Here are some ways to engage with a customer who buy heartburn or indigestion medication, or someone who has seen the poster and wants to talk about their symptoms.

Although heartburn is a common ailment, it doesn't mean it should be ignored.

Prolonged heartburn can have an underlying cause that your GP could discuss with you.

A GP can provide alternative or stronger treatments and help rule out any more serious causes of your symptoms, such as oesopho-gastric cancer.