



# Healthy living and cancer

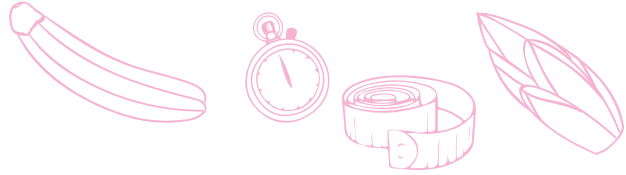
## a woman's guide

Reduce  
your risk of  
cancer

Spot  
cancer  
early



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**Note:** We use the term 'woman/women' in this booklet, but we understand that not everyone born female identifies as a woman. Whoever you are, wherever you come from, we are here for you.

# Your lifestyle

## Don't leave cancer to chance

4 in 10 cancer cases are preventable by getting healthier and avoiding risk factors...



### Don't smoke

Cut out the cigarettes and cut your cancer risk.  
[See page 5](#)



### Be a healthy weight

Being a healthy weight could reduce your risk of 13 cancers! [See page 7](#)



### Be active every day

Women of all ages, shapes and sizes benefit from being active. [See page 13](#)



### Have a healthy diet

Eat well to keep a healthy weight and cut your cancer risk. [See page 9](#)



### Limit alcohol

The less you drink, the lower your cancer risk.  
[See page 15](#)



## Protect your skin from UV rays

Skin cancer is the most common cancer in Ireland, but you can do a lot to prevent it. [See page 17](#)

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## Learn about hormones

Talk to your doctor about HRT and the contraceptive pill. [See page 19](#)

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## Breastfeed your baby

Breastfeeding can reduce your risk of breast and ovarian cancers.

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## Get vaccinated

The HPV vaccination reduces the risk of cervical cancer and some other cancers. It's offered to children in the first year of secondary school.

[See page 25](#)

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## Get screened

Take part in bowel, breast and cervical screening.

[See page 41](#)

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## Other ways to reduce your cancer risk

### Avoid second-hand smoke

Second-hand smoke increases the risk of cancer in non-smokers. Keep your home and car smoke-free.

### Know about radon gas

Find out if radon levels are high in your area and what to do about them if they are. See [www.radon.ie](http://www.radon.ie)

### Take care in the workplace

Workplace substances like asbestos and formaldehyde can increase your risk of certain cancers. Always follow health and safety instructions.



# How healthy are you?

Take our quiz to find out if there are simple steps you could take to improve your health and reduce your risk of cancer. Tick the answers that most closely apply to you.

## 1) How often are you physically active?

- A** Once a week or less
- B** A few times a week
- C** Daily

## 2) How long are you physically active for in total each day?

- A** Less than 10 minutes
- B** 10–25 minutes
- C** 30 minutes or more

## 3) How many portions of fruits and vegetables do you eat a day?

- A** 2 or fewer
- B** 3–4
- C** 5 or more

## 4) How often do you eat red meat (beef, pork, lamb)?

- A** Every day
- B** 4–5 times a week
- C** 2–3 times a week or less

## 5) How many standard drinks of alcohol do you have each week?

- A** 8 or more
- B** 1–7
- C** None



## 6) Do you smoke?

- A** Yes
- B** Yes, but I am trying to give up
- C** No

## 7) Do you know your weight and your body mass index (BMI)?

- A** No
- B** Yes, I need to lose weight
- C** Yes, I am a healthy weight

## 8) Where on your body do you tend to carry your weight?

- A** Around the middle
- B** All over
- C** I don't tend to carry excess weight

## 9) When did you last have a check-up with your doctor?

- A** I have never had one
- B** Over two years ago
- C** In the last year

### How did you score?

#### Mostly As

You could be leading a healthier lifestyle. Small changes could make a big difference to your health and reduce your risk of cancer.

#### Mostly Bs

You're on the right road, but there's still room for improvement.

#### Mostly Cs

Well done, you seem to be taking lots of steps to reduce your cancer risk!

# Smoking

Smoking is a big risk factor for cancer, but it's a risk you can do something about.

## Fast facts

- At least 7 in every 10 lung cancers are caused by smoking.
- More women in Ireland die from lung cancer than any other cancer.
- Smoking causes at least 13 other types of cancer that affect women.
- Quitting smoking doesn't just reduce your risk of cancer. It's the best thing you can do for your overall health.
- We don't recommend vaping, even as a way to quit smoking. We don't know how it affects future health.



## The BEAUTY OF QUITTING



Quitting smoking improves your complexion as your skin becomes better nourished with oxygen and nutrients.

You can also expect to have brighter eyes, fewer wrinkles, stronger nails and shinier hair!



## What's the best way to quit?

Research shows that using nicotine replacement therapy (NRT), such as patches or gum, along with support gives you the best chance of success. QUIT.ie can help you with support and free NRT.

# Top tips for quitting smoking

## Get ready to quit

Think about the reasons you want to stop and what might make it hard. Pick a date when you're ready.

## Get support

- Ask your family or friends to support you and not to smoke around you.
- Talk to your doctor for advice.
- Call the HSE Quit Team on Freephone **1800 201 203**, visit **www.quit.ie**, or freetext **QUIT** to **50100**.

## Know your triggers

Think about situations where you will have a strong urge to smoke, and prepare for them. Change your routine if it helps. Withdrawal symptoms will disappear within a few weeks.

## Use the 4 Ds to deal with cravings

- **D**elay at least three minutes and the urge will pass.
- **D**rink a glass of water or fruit juice (sip slowly).
- **D**istract yourself – move away from the situation.
- **D**eep breath – breathe slowly and deeply – to help you to relax.

## Take one day at a time

Every day without a cigarette is good news for your health, your family and your pocket. Try again if you don't succeed the first time.

## Live well without smoking

Take more exercise and eat well to feel even better. And enjoy the extra money in your pocket.

“ If you smoke 10 cigarettes a day  
**you'll save nearly €3,000**  
a year by stopping ”



# Body weight

Keeping a healthy weight is one of the best ways to reduce your cancer risk.

## Fast facts

- Getting to a healthy weight if you're overweight or obese could reduce your risk of 13 different cancers.
- Extra body fat stored around your waist increases cancer risk. These extra fat cells make extra hormones that can increase your risk of cancer.

## Are you a healthy weight?

### Waist measurement

Measure around your waist from your bellybutton using a tape measure. If it's more than 81cm (31.5 inches), you may have excess body fat.

### Body mass index (BMI)

Your BMI is a number that can help tell you if you are the right weight for your height. Remember, though, BMI is not always an accurate measure if you are an athlete, pregnant or short in height.

To find out more about your waist measurement and BMI, search 'body weight' at [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)



## Top tips for being a healthy weight

### **Eat breakfast**

Get your metabolism going by eating a balanced breakfast.

### **Portion caution**

Watch your portion sizes and try not to have second helpings.

### **Avoid liquid calories**

Sugary fizzy drinks, fruit squashes and alcohol are all high in sugar and calories.

### **Drink lots of water – aim for 1.5 litres a day**

Keep a bottle of water with you and sip throughout the day.

### **Never shop when you're hungry**

Make a list so that you're not tempted by unhealthy treats.

### **Eat slowly**

Enjoy the taste of your food and eat at a table if possible.

### **Foods high in fat and sugar can lead to weight gain**

Processed foods can have hidden sugar and fat, so check the labels.

### **Be realistic**

Some weeks will be more difficult than others. The key is to keep going.

Most women can reach and stay within a healthy weight range by eating healthily, watching portion sizes and becoming more active.

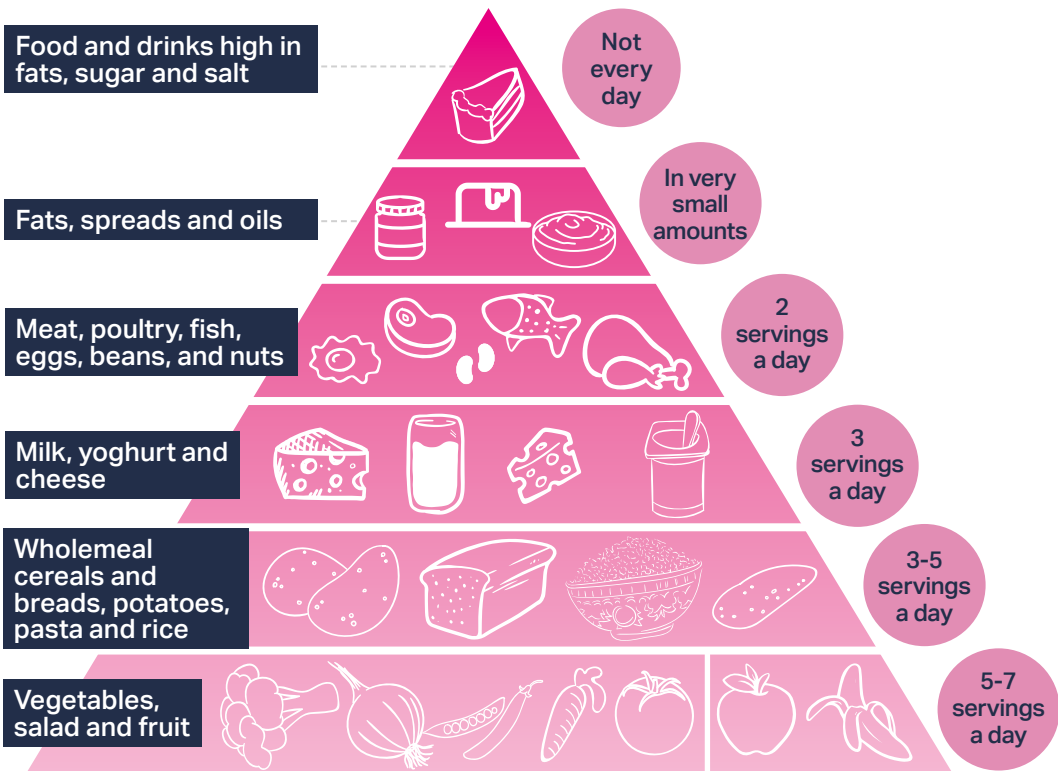
**“ If you do the small things right,  
big things happen! ”**

# Healthy eating

Healthy eating can help you keep a healthy body weight and reduce your cancer risk.

## Fast facts

- The food pyramid tells you what makes up a healthy balanced diet – use it to make healthy food choices every day.
- If you're a cancer survivor, healthy eating may reduce your risk of cancer coming back.



## Did you know?

Claims on food packaging can be misleading. For example, a 'reduced-fat' food can be high in sugar. Looking carefully at food labels can help you to make better food choices.

### ✗ This is a lot

(per 100g food)

20g of fat or more

5g saturates or more

1.5g salt or more

0.6g sodium or more

10g sugars or more

### ✓ This is a little

(per 100g food)

3g fat or less

1g saturates or less

0.3g salt or less

0.3g sodium or less

2g sugars or less



### Question: Should I count calories?

It's helpful to know which foods are high in calories, as they lead to weight gain, but counting calories can be hard, and everyone needs different amounts, depending on their age, body and activity. Follow the tips on **page 11** to lose weight and feel great, without needing a calculator!

# Top tips for eating well



## Fruit and vegetables

Eat **5-7 portions** of fruit, vegetables and salad every day. Have some fruit at breakfast, add salad to your sandwiches and have more vegetables with your dinner.



## Fill up on fibre

Go for **high-fibre** foods like wholegrain bread, fruit and vegetables, beans, lentils, brown rice and oats.



## Limit red and processed meat

- **Limit** or cut out processed meats like ham, rashers and salami.
- Swap red meat for chicken, fish, beans and vegetarian/vegan proteins a few times a week.



## Watch your fats

- Use small amounts of butter and oil. Avoid fatty meat and fried foods.
- Go for small amounts of **healthy fats**, found in nuts, seeds and oily fish.
- Cook healthier by steaming, baking and grilling.



### Avoid high-calorie foods

**Cut down** on fizzy drinks, fast food, sweets and cake.



### Eat less salt

- Try to avoid pre-packed and processed meals. Go for **fresh ingredients** that you cook yourself.
- Check the labels for salt (sodium) content – even foods like cornflakes can have salt added.
- Avoid adding salt when cooking or when eating your food.

“Make it a  
**lifestyle,**  
not a duty!”



# Active living

'Active living' means finding ways to be active in everything you do, every day.

## Fast facts

- Getting active can help reduce your risk of bowel cancer, breast cancer, womb cancer and possibly lung cancer.
- Getting active will also make you fitter, more energetic and boost your mood.
- Activity doesn't just mean exercise – anything that makes you a bit warmer and slightly out of breath is good.
- Aim for 150 minutes of moderate exercise or 70 minutes of vigorous activity a week.
- If you can, try some more vigorous activity – the kind that leaves you out of breath and sweaty.

## Stronger muscles

Try to do activities that will strengthen your muscles at least 2 days a week, such as lifting weights, cycling or using resistance bands.

**i**  
**FACT**

**Active parents have active children!**

# Top tips for being active every day



## Start with what you can manage

If you feel you're unfit, start by walking or doing another gentle exercise.



## Increase your level of activity as you get fitter

Set new goals to keep building your level of activity as you get fitter.



## Stay safe

See your doctor for advice if you are very overweight or have medical problems.



## Stand more, sit less

Avoid too much time sitting or lying down, for example, watching TV.



## Be active in your everyday life

You don't have to join a gym.

- Walk or cycle instead of driving.
- Take the stairs whenever you can.
- Play an active game with your kids.
- Stand up and walk around while on the phone.



## Get fit with friends or family

Having company can make exercise more fun. Plus, you can encourage each other if you're feeling lazy.

**“ Think of it as a medicine you need to take every day!”**



# Alcohol

Alcohol is a carcinogen – that means it can cause cancer.

## Fast facts

- Alcohol is a risk factor for 7 types of cancer: breast, mouth, throat, voice box, oesophagus, bowel and liver.
- Even 1 drink a day can increase your risk of some cancers.
- There is no safe amount of alcohol, but the less you drink, the lower your risk.

## Did you know?

As well as reducing your risk of cancer, there are many other possible benefits to cutting down.

- Weight loss
- Healthier skin – alcohol dehydrates the skin
- Better quality sleep
- More energy
- More money
- Better mental health
- A lower risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, liver disease and many other health conditions



**Question: Why should women drink less alcohol than men?**

**Answer:** Women tend to have a higher percentage of body fat and less fluid in their bodies than men. This means that alcohol is less diluted in women's bodies. It takes less alcohol for us to feel the effects and alcohol stays in our bodies for longer.

# Top tips for reducing alcohol risk

## Drink less

Drink no more than **11 standard drinks** a week if you are a woman, spread out over the week. Have 2 or 3 alcohol-free days every week.

## Know how much you're drinking

Most people drink more than they think. Count your standard drinks for a week to find out. Remember, it's how much you drink that matters. All types of alcohol increase the risk of cancer, including red wine.

## Measure your drinks at home

It's easy to pour a double or a treble measure of spirits without realising, and a big wine glass can hold 2 or 3 standard drinks.

## Drink some non-alcoholic drinks

Try switching to non-alcoholic drinks as the evening goes on. Or have a few glasses of water in between.

## Dilute your alcohol

Use more mixer in your drink or go for low-alcohol beer or wines.

## Try to quit smoking

If you drink and smoke, your risk of cancer is even higher. See page 6 for tips on quitting smoking.

### A standard drink is



Half a pint of stout, lager or cider



A single pub measure of spirits



A small glass of wine

# Sun and UV rays

Skin cancer is the most common cancer in Ireland, but you can do a lot to prevent it.



## Fast facts

- UV radiation from the sun's rays or sunbeds causes:
  - **Non-melanoma skin cancer**
  - **Melanoma skin cancer**
- Non-melanoma skin cancer is the most common kind. Melanoma cancer is more serious but not as common.
- Skin cancer isn't just linked to sunburn. Even on cloudy Irish days up to 90% of the sun's UV rays can reach your skin.
- Be **SunSmart** every day, April to September, whatever the weather.
- Be extra careful if you take regular walks, garden regularly, play sports, work outside or generally spend a lot of time outside.

## Did you know?

Sunbeds are banned for those under 18 years old. But this does not mean they're safe for others to use. Regular sunbed use by those under the age of 35 increases the risk of melanoma by 75%. Sunbeds also cause wrinkles, premature ageing and leathery skin.

# Top tips for keeping safe in the sun

## The SunSmart Code

- Stay in the shade, especially between 11 am and 3 pm.
- Cover up – wear a shirt with a collar and long shorts, dresses or skirts.
- Wear a hat that shades your face, neck and ears.
- Wear wraparound sunglasses to protect your eyes.
- Use sunscreen (SPF 30 or higher) with at least a 4-star UVA rating – apply 20 minutes before going out in the sun and reapply every 2 hours.



## What's your skin type?

- Do you tan easily or do you burn?
- Knowing your skin type will help you to protect your skin from the sun.

### Take our quiz at

[www.cancer.ie/reduce-your-risk/sunsmart/skin-type-quiz](http://www.cancer.ie/reduce-your-risk/sunsmart/skin-type-quiz)



### Question: What about vitamin D?

**Answer:** You can get vitamin D from sunlight on your skin, but you should always use sunscreen. Talk to your doctor if you're worried about your vitamin D levels.

# Hormones and cancer

Hormones are chemicals found in your body. Some hormones can affect your risk of certain cancers.

## HRT and cancer

HRT (hormone replacement therapy) is a hormone treatment given to improve the symptoms of menopause. Menopause is when your periods stop, and your body produces fewer oestrogen and progesterone hormones. Having fewer of these hormones can cause symptoms that can affect your quality of life.

If you're experiencing symptoms of the menopause, the benefits of HRT may outweigh any small risks. You should discuss the benefits and possible risks of HRT with your doctor. This will help you decide if HRT is right for you.

- **Combined HRT (oestrogen and progesterone)** is the most common type. It is linked to a small increased risk of breast cancer and ovarian cancer. The risk reduces after you stop taking HRT. Combined HRT can lower the risk of bowel cancer. It does not increase the risk of womb cancer.
- **Oestrogen-only HRT** increases the risk of womb cancer, but it is usually only given to people who have had their womb removed. Oestrogen-only HRT also slightly increases the risk of ovarian cancer. The risk reduces after you stop taking HRT.

How HRT might affect your cancer risk can depend on how long you take it for, your age and if you take it before, during or after the menopause.

## Oral contraceptive pill and cancer

The oral contraceptive pill (OCP) increases the risk of some cancers and lowers the risk of others. It is an effective method of contraception, and the benefits for you may outweigh any small risks.

- **Increased risk:** The OCP slightly increases the risk of breast cancer and cervical cancer. In general, the small risk increases the longer you take the pill and reduces after you stop.
- **Reduced risk:** OCPs that contain the hormones oestrogen and progesterone (combined pill) can lower the risk of ovarian and womb (endometrial) cancer. The reduced risk stays after you stop taking the pill.

Talk to your doctor about taking the pill and your cancer risk.

# Cancer types

In this section, we give you the most important information about cancers that begin in the female reproductive system. These are known as gynaecological cancers.

## The 5 gynaecological cancers are

1

Ovarian cancer

2

Cervical cancer

3

Vaginal cancer

4

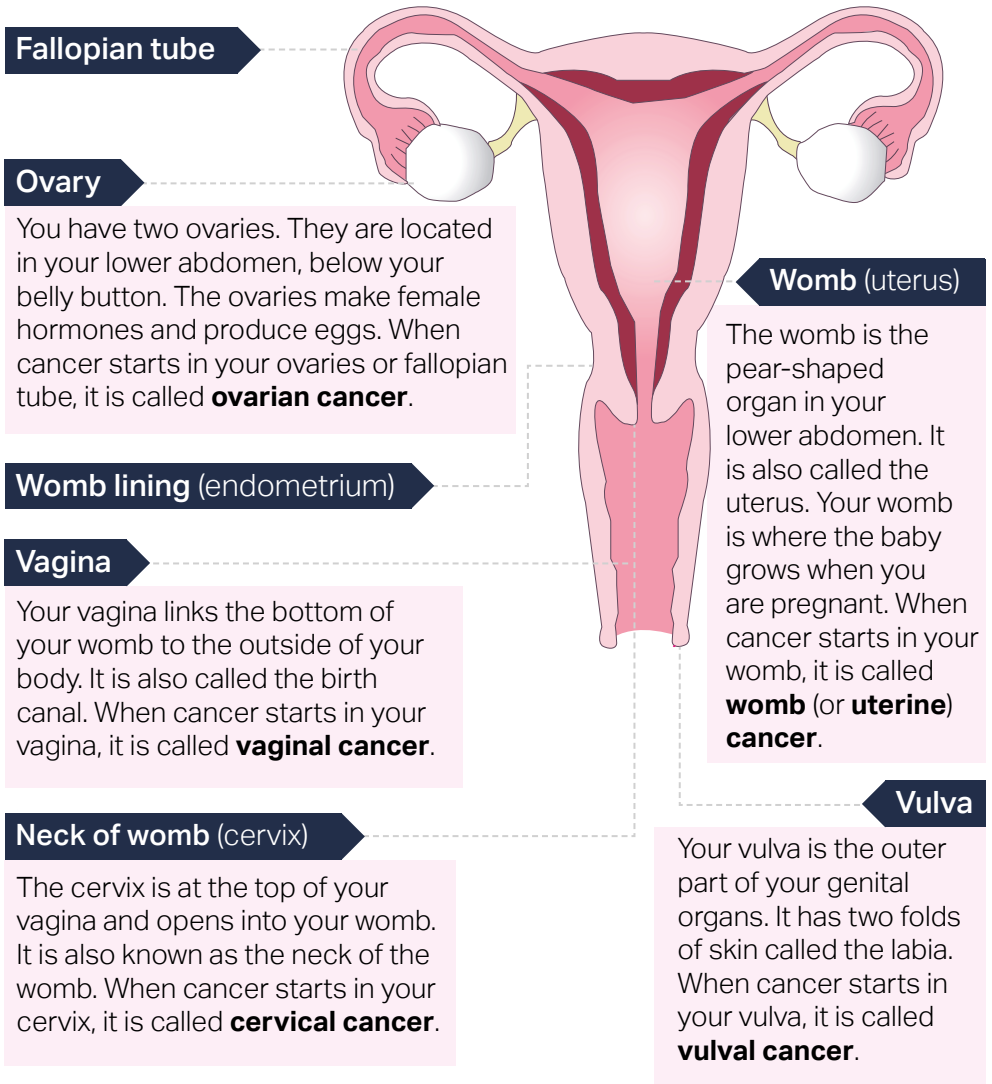
**Womb cancer**  
(also known as endometrial or uterine cancer)

5

**Vulval cancer**

Gynaecological cancers are sometimes discussed as a group, but each one has different signs, symptoms and risk factors (things that may increase the risk of getting cancer).

# Reproductive system



If you don't understand something or you need more information, call our Support Line on Freephone **1800 200 700** or email the nurses at **supportline@irishcancer.ie**

# Ovarian cancer

Ovarian cancer usually affects women who have gone through the menopause and are over 50, but it can affect younger people too. Around 400 women in Ireland are diagnosed every year.

## What are the signs of ovarian cancer?

The symptoms of ovarian cancer can be vague and quite mild. Symptoms include:

- Pain or dragging feeling in your lower tummy area, back or legs.
- Vague indigestion or nausea (feeling sick).
- Bloating feeling.
- Not being able to eat as much and feeling full more quickly.
- Persistent swollen tummy.
- Feeling tired all the time.
- Change in bowel or bladder habits, such as diarrhoea, constipation or wanting to pass urine very often.
- Irregular periods or bleeding between periods or after the menopause.
- Pain during sex.



If you have any unusual vaginal bleeding, see your doctor straight away. If you have any of the other signs for two weeks or longer and they are not normal for you, see your doctor.



## What increases the risk of ovarian cancer?

As with most cancers, your risk of ovarian cancer increases as you get older. Other things that increase your risk of ovarian cancer include:

- Having close family members (such as your mother, sister, aunt or grandmother) on either your mother's or father's side who have had ovarian cancer. If you have a strong family history of ovarian cancer, there might be a faulty gene in your family that increases your risk. For example, a faulty BRCA gene or genes linked to Lynch Syndrome (see page 42).
- Never having been pregnant.
- Being overweight or obese.
- Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) (see page 19).
- Having diabetes or endometriosis.

# Cervical cancer

Cervical cancer can happen at any age, but it is most common between the ages of 30 and 50. Each year, around 250 women in Ireland are diagnosed with cervical cancer.



## What are the signs of cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer often has no symptoms in its early stages. This is why regular screening is important. Symptoms include:

- Vaginal bleeding that is not normal for you.
  - Bleeding after sex.
  - Bleeding in between your periods.
  - Bleeding after the menopause.
- A vaginal discharge that may smell unpleasant.
- Pain or discomfort during sex or in your pelvis.

## What increases the risk of cervical cancer?

### Human papilloma virus (HPV)

Most cervical cancer cases are caused by a virus called human papilloma virus (HPV). HPV is spread through intimate skin-to-skin contact, such as during sexual activity. For most people, HPV infections come and go without any symptoms. But some people can have trouble getting rid of the virus, especially if they smoke. Prolonged HPV infections can lead to changes in the cells of your cervix. Over time, these changes can turn into cancer.

## Smoking

When you smoke, chemicals that cause cancer travel to your cervix and can affect how it fights infection.

Other things that increase your chance of getting cervical cancer include:

- A family history of cervical cancer.
- Taking the contraceptive pill (see page 19).

## How can I help reduce my risk of getting cervical cancer?

You can significantly lower your risk of cervical cancer by:

- Having regular cervical screening tests.
- Getting vaccinated against the HPV virus.
- Not smoking or quitting smoking.

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### Regular screening tests

Having regular screening can help prevent cervical cancer developing – it can identify people at risk before cancer develops.

CervicalCheck is a free service that provides cervical screening tests to women aged between 25 and 65. For more information, see page 41.

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### Getting vaccinated against HPV

The HPV vaccine is a safe and effective way to reduce your risk of getting cervical cancer. The vaccine works best when given before a person is exposed to the virus. This means before first sexual contact.

The vaccine is available free to children in first year of secondary school. Remember that if you are vaccinated against the HPV virus, you still need to have regular screening tests. The vaccine lowers your chance of getting cervical cancer, but you are still at risk.

# Bronwyn's story

When Bronwyn Reidy watched a documentary about Laura Brennan, who died at age 26 from cervical cancer, she felt it was important to get her cervical screening test. Bronwyn was just 25, with a young daughter, Millie.



When I went to my GP, the receptionist told me I needed to book a test online through CervicalCheck, but something was telling me I needed to get this done now. I asked to speak to the doctor directly, and he saw to it straight away. He seemed worried during the test and called two other GPs in to examine me. There was a visible tumour. That night, I became unwell, was vomiting and weak, and went straight to A&E. I was told I had cervical cancer. I was scared and didn't know what I was going to do.

The support I got in St Luke's during treatment was amazing. I had radiation daily, 9 hours of chemotherapy on Mondays and then had brachytherapy (see page 42). It was intense.

I finished my treatment just before Covid hit. But lockdown did have its positives – I got to spend so much time with Millie.

I appreciate life so much more now. I used to be such an overthinker and worry about stupid things. Now, I just enjoy life with Millie and am thankful for my family and friends.

I'd urge everyone to please listen to your body. If you suspect something is wrong, go with your gut and get it checked. Your health is your wealth and should always come first. Book a test – it could save your life.

Finally, I would simply say that life is short and precious so live every day like it's your last. Make memories, tell the people in your life you love them, and, most importantly, be kind – it costs absolutely nothing.

# Womb cancer

Womb cancer (also called uterine cancer) is more common in women over the age of 50, but it can affect younger women too. Anyone with a womb can get womb cancer. More than 550 women are diagnosed each year in Ireland.

## What are the signs of womb cancer?

Vaginal bleeding that is not normal for you. This might be:

- Bleeding after sex.
- Bleeding in between your periods.
- Bleeding after the menopause.

Other symptoms include:

- Vaginal discharge that may smell unpleasant.
- Persistent pain or pressure in your pelvis.



## What increases the risk of womb cancer?

As with most cancers, your risk of womb cancer increases as you get older. Other things that increase the risk include:

- High levels of the hormone oestrogen. You may have higher levels of oestrogen if you:
  - Are overweight
  - Take oestrogen-only HRT (see page 19).
- Having never been pregnant.
- A family history of womb cancer or Lynch Syndrome (see page 42).
- Polycystic ovary syndrome or diabetes.
- The hormone treatment tamoxifen (see page 42).

# Vaginal cancer

Vaginal cancer in Ireland is very rare. Around 10 women are diagnosed with it each year. It is most common in women aged between 50 and 70, but younger women can develop it too.

## What are the signs of vaginal cancer?

- Unusual vaginal bleeding, often after sex.
- Abnormal vaginal discharge.
- Pain during sex.
- An itch in the vagina that won't go away.
- Frequency and discomfort when passing urine.
- Pain in the back passage (rectum).
- A lump in the vagina.



## What increases the risk of getting vaginal cancer?

The cause of vaginal cancer is unknown, but it is more common if you:

- Have been exposed to HPV – for more information on HPV, see page 24.
- Have had abnormal cervical checks in the past, or have had cervical cancer.
- Are a smoker.

# Vulval cancer

Vulval cancer is also very rare. About 50 women in Ireland are diagnosed with the disease every year. Vulval cancer is usually found in women over the age of 50, but younger women can develop it too.

## What are the signs of vulval cancer?

- Severe itching, burning or bleeding on the vulva that does not go away.
- Colour changes on the skin of the vulva, where it is redder or whiter than normal for you.
- Sores, new lumps, a rash or warts on the vulva that do not go away.
- Pain in your pelvis, especially when you pass urine or have sex.



**Check your vulva once a month for any changes**

## What increases the risk of getting vulval cancer?

The cause of vulval cancer is unknown, but it is more common if you:

- Have been exposed to HPV – for more information on HPV, see page 24.
- Have had abnormal cervical checks in the past, or have had cervical cancer.
- Are a smoker.
- Have vulval itching or burning that returns again after treatment.
- Have long-term vulval skin conditions that are also linked to vulval cancer.

# Symptom checker

Below is a table with some of the signs and symptoms linked to gynaecological cancers. Often symptoms are hard to notice, or you may think symptoms are due to something else. That is why it is important to take notice of your body and know what is normal for you.

See your doctor immediately if you have bleeding that is not normal for you. For example, if it is heavier or happens at an unusual time.

See your doctor if you have any of the other symptoms for two weeks or longer. It may be nothing to worry about, but find out for sure.

Symptom	Cervical cancer	Ovarian cancer	Womb cancer	Vaginal cancer	Vulval cancer
Unusual vaginal discharge	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pain in your pelvis	✓	✓	✓		✓
Pain in your abdomen or lower back		✓	✓		
Bloating or swollen abdomen		✓			
Changes in bowel or bladder habits		✓		✓	
Itching or burning of the vulva					✓
Changes in vulva colour or skin, such as a rash or warts					✓
Unusual vaginal bleeding	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Discomfort or pain during sexual intercourse	✓		✓	✓	
Feeling full more quickly		✓			



# Breast cancer

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women in Ireland, after non-melanoma skin cancer. Each year, nearly 3,500 women are diagnosed with the disease.

## What are the signs of breast cancer?

- **A lump or thickening** in your breast or armpit.
- **A change in size or shape of one breast.**
- **A change in the skin** of your breast, such as puckering, ridges or dimpling (the skin may look like orange peel).
- **A breast abscess** – this may appear as a red, tender area on your breast.
- **A change in your nipple**, such as a pulled-in, sunken or flattened nipple.
- **An unusual discharge** (liquid) from one or both of your nipples. The discharge may be blood-stained or watery.
- **A change on or around the nipple** such as a rash or flaky or crusted skin.
- **Swelling** in your armpit or around your collarbone.



## What increases the risk of getting breast cancer?

**Age:** Your risk of breast cancer increases as you get older.

**Family history:** If a close relative (such as a mother, sister or daughter) has had breast cancer.

**Dense breasts:** If your breasts have more non-fatty (dense) tissue, your risk is higher than someone with less dense breasts.

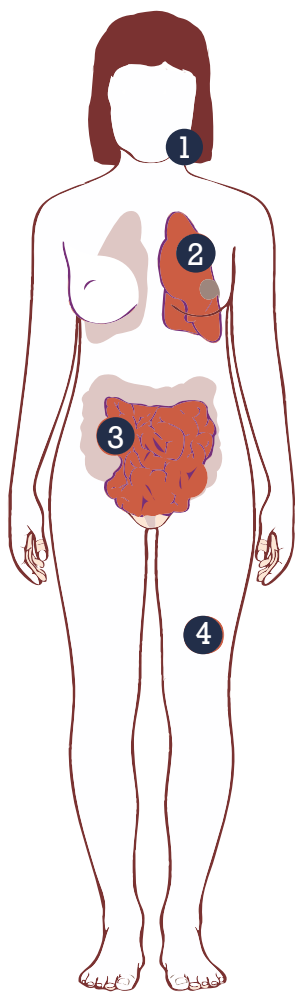
**Early periods or late menopause:** The risk is higher if you started your periods before the age of 12 or had menopause after the age of 55.

**Hormones:** Taking HRT or the contraceptive pill slightly increases the risk (see page 19).

## Ways to reduce your risk

- Limit or cut out alcohol
- Stay a healthy weight
- Be physically active
- Breastfeed for as long as possible

# Other common cancers



1

**Mouth, head and neck cancers**

**170** women diagnosed every year

2

**Lung cancer**

**1,200** women diagnosed every year

3

**Bowel cancer**

**1,200** women diagnosed every year

4

**Skin cancer**

Non-melanoma skin cancer: **5,000**

Melanoma skin cancer: **620**  
women diagnosed every year



For leaflets on reducing your cancer risk and signs and symptoms of common cancers, visit:

[www.cancer.ie/publications/reduce-your-risk](http://www.cancer.ie/publications/reduce-your-risk)

Our cancer nurses can send you free leaflets – call them on **1800 200 700**.

# Spot cancer early

You are more likely to survive cancer if you spot it early. But do you know what to look out for?

## Unexplained changes



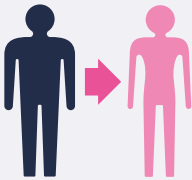
### A lump or swelling

Make sure to check your whole body, not just your breasts.



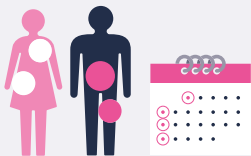
### Bleeding that is not normal for you

Coughing up blood or noticing it in your pee or poo is not normal. Neither is bleeding from your vagina between periods, after sex or after the menopause.



### Weight loss

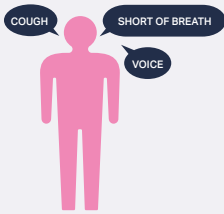
It is normal to see small weight changes over time. But a big weight loss, not related to dieting, may be a sign of something more serious.



### Pain that does not go away

If you feel pain for more than four weeks that you cannot explain, talk to your doctor about it.

## Persistent changes



### **A cough, changes in your voice or feeling short of breath**

Speak to your doctor if you have any of these problems for more than three weeks, especially if you are a smoker or ex-smoker.



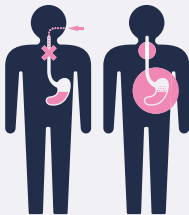
### **A sore that does not heal**

If a spot, wart or sore does not heal in a few weeks, get it checked by your doctor, even if it is painless.



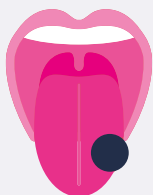
### **Bloating**

If bloating does not go away within a few weeks, talk to your doctor about it.



### **Difficulty swallowing, indigestion or heartburn**

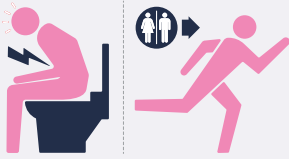
It is not normal to have indigestion or heartburn that happens a lot or is very painful. Difficulty swallowing is not normal either. Get it checked by your doctor.



### **Mouth or tongue ulcer**

Having a mouth or tongue ulcer for three weeks or more is not normal and needs to be checked by your doctor or dentist.

## Unusual changes



### A change in your bowel or bladder habits

If you have constipation, diarrhoea or problems passing urine for more than a few weeks, talk to your doctor.

COLOUR



SHAPE

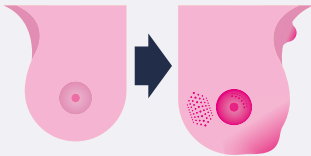


SIZE



### A new mole or change to an existing mole

Get into the habit of checking your skin every month for new moles. Also watch for changes in colour, shape and size of existing moles.



### Any change in your breast

Get into the habit of looking at and feeling your breasts for changes in the shape, size, nipples and skin.

# Worried?

## What can you do?

### Don't ignore problems or warning signs

If you have any changes in your body that are unusual for you, don't ignore them. Call your doctor and make an appointment, even if you feel OK. Most cancers can be successfully treated if they're found early enough. Putting off going to the doctor could mean the cancer is found later and it could be more difficult to treat.

Often when women notice something different about themselves, they don't think much of it. Especially women approaching the menopause, because they expect their bodies to start behaving differently. But don't be tempted to put something unusual down to getting older – check with your doctor.

### Don't worry

If you notice a change, the chances are it will not be cancer. But getting it checked is not wasting anyone's time. It could save your life.



# Get the best from your visit to the doctor

## Our top tips...



### Be comfortable

Some symptoms are hard to talk about. For example, you might have blood in your poo or feel pain during sex. We promise your doctor has heard it all before, but if you don't feel comfortable talking to a male doctor, ask if you can see a female doctor.



### Be prepared

Your doctor will probably ask a lot of questions, so think about:

- Your family history
- Your medical history
- Your lifestyle
- Your general physical and mental health
- Any medication you're taking

Think about any symptoms you have – when they started and how they feel. It can help to keep track of symptoms over a few days by writing everything down.

If you notice anything else unusual, always tell your doctor, even if you think it's not important!





### Speak out

Mention anything that's on your mind, even if the doctor doesn't ask. Be honest and give as much information as you can if the doctor asks you anything.



### Ask questions

- Write a list of what you want to ask.
- Listen carefully and ask again if you don't understand.
- You can take someone along to your appointment to help you remember your questions or what the doctor says.



### Don't be afraid to go to another doctor

- Trust your doctor, but it's OK to go to a different doctor if you're not happy with the answers you're getting.
- If you have something that's not normal for you, it's important that you get to the bottom of it.

**When it comes to your body, you're the expert.**

# Screening saves lives

## What is screening?

Screening means testing for cancer when you have no symptoms. Screening is a great way to spot cancer early or find changes that might become cancer. You're more likely to recover if cancer is found at an early stage.

There are three national cancer screening programmes in Ireland:

- **BreastCheck**
- **CervicalCheck**
- **BowelScreen**



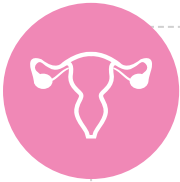


## BreastCheck

BreastCheck invites women aged 50 to 69 for a free mammogram (breast X-ray) every two years.

Make sure you're on the register by:

- Contacting BreastCheck on Freephone 1800 45 45 55 or
- Checking online at **[www.breastcheck.ie](http://www.breastcheck.ie)**



## CervicalCheck

CervicalCheck provides free HPV screening tests to women aged 25 to 65.

A cervical screening is a simple test that takes a couple of minutes.

To arrange your test, contact your GP or family planning clinic.

A full list of registered practitioners is available at **[www.cervicalcheck.ie](http://www.cervicalcheck.ie)** or by calling Freephone 1800 45 45 55.

CervicalCheck will send you a reminder letter when your next test is due.



## BowelScreen

BowelScreen sends a free test kit to people aged 60 to 69 every two years.

You send back a sample of your faeces (poo) and this is tested for traces of blood – it's very quick and easy.

The test does not tell you if you have bowel cancer, but it might tell you that you need more tests.

Call BowelScreen on Freephone 1800 45 45 55 to check you're on the register.

# What does that word mean?

Abdomen	The part of your body that lies between your chest and hips.
Brachytherapy	A type of radiotherapy where the radiation source is put inside the body.
BRCA genes	BRCA1 and BRCA2 are genes that can increase the risk of some cancers if they mutate (change).
Cancer	A disease where cells in your body grow out of control. These abnormal cells can spread to other body parts. There are many types of cancer.
Cell	The building blocks that make up your body. They are tiny and can only be seen under a microscope.
Gene	A single unit of genetic information. It holds information to build cells and pass genetic traits from parent to child.
Human papilloma virus (HPV)	A common virus, which normally causes no problems. Some types of HPV increase the risk of certain cancers.
Lynch syndrome	An inherited faulty gene that increases the risk of some cancers, such as bowel and womb.
Menopause	The time of life when a woman's periods stop.
Pelvis	The area below your belly and in between your hipbones.
Risk factor	Anything that increases your chance of getting a disease.
Screening	Checking for disease in healthy people.
Symptoms	A change or feature that you notice in your body.
Tamoxifen	A drug used to treat patients with breast cancer. If cancer cells are helped to grow by the hormone oestrogen, tamoxifen stops oestrogen from helping the cells to grow.

# Useful organisations

## Giving up smoking

For help with quitting, and information on free nicotine replacement therapy (NRT), contact the HSE Quit Team.

Phone **1800 201 203** | freetext **QUIT** to **50100**

Website **[www.quit.ie](http://www.quit.ie)**

## Getting active

Visit **[www2.hse.ie/living-well/exercise](http://www2.hse.ie/living-well/exercise)** for tips on getting more active.

## Healthy eating

Visit **[www.safefood.net](http://www.safefood.net)** for meal plans, recipes and more information on healthy eating and weight loss.

## Alcohol

Freephone the HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline on **1800 459 459**.

Visit **[www.askaboutalcohol.ie](http://www.askaboutalcohol.ie)** for information on alcohol and your health and a drinks calculator to help you track your drinking.

## Breastfeeding

Visit **[www.breastfeeding.ie](http://www.breastfeeding.ie)** for support and advice on breastfeeding.

## Menopause

Visit **[www2.hse.ie/conditions/menopause](http://www2.hse.ie/conditions/menopause)** for information about the menopause.

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## Any questions?

For support, information and advice about anything cancer-related, talk to our cancer nurses.

### Call our Support Line

Support Line Freephone **1800 200 700**

You can also visit a Daffodil Centre.

See **[www.cancer.ie/daffodilcentres](http://www.cancer.ie/daffodilcentres)** for more information.

**E** [supportline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:supportline@irishcancer.ie)

**W** [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

**f** Find us on Facebook

**t** Follow us on Twitter [@IrishCancerSoc](https://twitter.com/IrishCancerSoc)