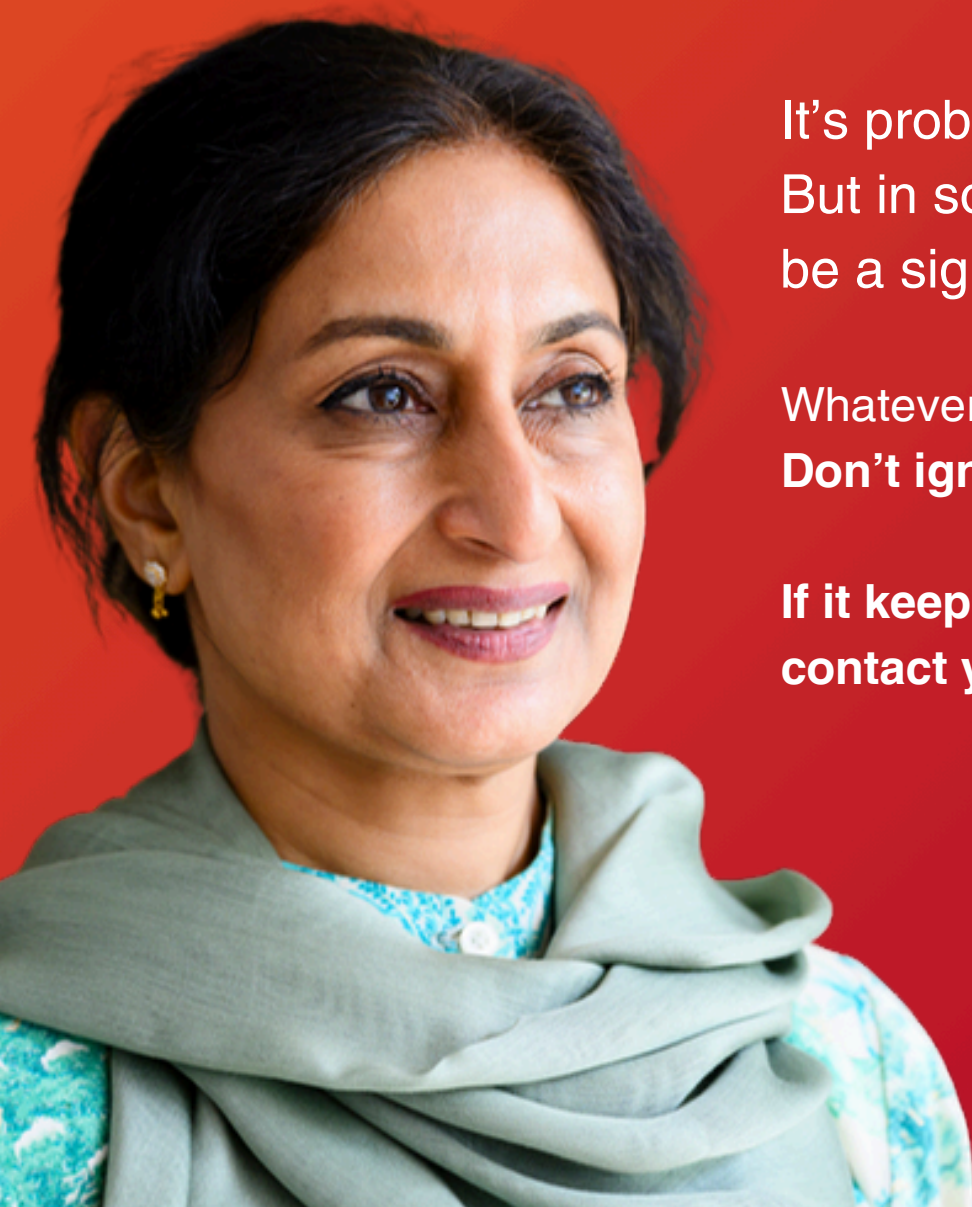


# You might call it **acid or burning in the chest.**



It's probably nothing.  
But in some cases, it could  
be a sign of cancer.


Whatever you call it,  
**Don't ignore it.**

**If it keeps coming back,  
contact your GP practice.**

# Introduction


This toolkit outlines key information about oesophageal cancer signs and symptoms, as well as information about prevention, lowering your risk of developing cancer, and how to spread awareness.

The Oesophageal Cancer Toolkit covers:

- What oesophageal cancer is
  - Signs and symptoms
  - Risks and causes
  - What Barrett's oesophagus is
  - How to spread awareness
  - Suggested newsletter copy
  - Suggested social media copy
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# Campaign Overview

In February 2026, RM Partners North West and South West London Cancer Alliance in partnership with Heartburn Cancer UK (HCUK) is supporting a pan-London campaign to help more people recognise the signs and symptoms of oesophageal cancer.


The aim is to help more people recognise the signs and symptoms of oesophageal cancer and to contact their GP practice early with any concerns.

The campaign '**Whatever you call it**' is focusing on people over the age of 45, and those from lower socio-economic groups, as they are more likely to experience a late-stage cancer diagnosis.

It includes people in this age group from Black and South Asian ethnic backgrounds, who are known to experience health inequalities.

The RM Partners campaign will run in areas of highest deprivation across all 14 boroughs in north west and south west London across outdoor advertising, social media and online search engines.

The oesophageal cancer awareness campaign will run from 1-28 February 2026 as part of Oesophageal Cancer Awareness Month.



# Key Messages:

- In England, over 9,354 people are diagnosed with oesophageal cancer each year and it is the 14th most common cancer. It is the 7th most common cause of cancer death in the UK and the 4th most common cause of cancer death for men.
- The wall of the oesophagus (the food pipe) has several layers of tissue.
- Oesophageal cancer starts in the inner lining of the oesophagus and can spread outward through the other layers.
- There are two main types of oesophageal cancer: adenocarcinoma, which typically occurs in the lower part of the oesophagus, and squamous cell carcinoma, which occurs in the upper or middle part of the oesophagus.
- 59% of oesophageal cancer cases in the UK are preventable.
- The biggest preventable cause of oesophageal cancer in the UK is smoking or using tobacco products. Smoking and drinking together further increases the risk of some oesophageal cancers more than either by itself.
- 
- Due to the oesophagus' ability to expand, symptoms don't usually appear until the later stages when the tumour has grown to a larger size.
- Knowing the symptoms is important, as the earlier oesophageal cancer is found the more treatable it's likely to be.
- Around 86% of people diagnosed with stage 1 cancer survive for 1 years or more, compared with around 24% of people who are diagnosed at stage 4.



# Signs and Symptoms

*"Heartburn and indigestion are common and usually not serious.*

*However, if they're persistent and don't go away they could be a symptom of oesophageal cancer, as can difficulty swallowing (dysphagia) or unexplained weight loss.*

*If you have any of these symptoms or others that are not usual for you that last 3 weeks or more, please contact your GP practice.*

*The earlier cancer is detected, the easier it is to treat."*

**Dr Navdeep Alg, RM Partners Primary Care Cancer Lead, Sutton, Merton & Croydon and Dr Bina Modi, RM Partners Primary Care Lead, Brent & Harrow**



## Symptoms can include:

- Persistent heartburn, acid reflux or indigestion
- Difficulty swallowing (dysphagia)

Unfortunately, people often treat some of these symptoms with over-the-counter antacids (such as Gaviscon or Rennie) from the supermarket or chemist. This can mask a problem being found, treated, or monitored and shouldn't be seen as a long term solution.

## Other symptoms can include:

- Losing weight without trying to
- Pain in the middle of your chest, back or between the shoulder blades, especially when swallowing
- A cough that is not getting better
- A hoarse voice
- Feeling very tired for no reason

It is important to be checked by a GP or healthcare professional if your symptoms change, get worse or do not feel normal for you for 3 weeks or more.

# Risks and Causes

## Common risk factors

### Age

Cancer of the oesophagus is more common in older people. **Around 40 out of 100 oesophageal cancers (around 40%) develop in people aged 75 and over.**

### Gender

Men are more likely to develop oesophageal cancer than women, however women, particularly Asian women, have poorer outcomes when diagnosed.

### Smoking or using tobacco

**Smoking or using any type of tobacco products increases your risk of the 2 main types of oesophageal cancer:** squamous cell cancer and adenocarcinoma.

This includes:

- cigarettes
- cigars
- pipes and shisha
- chewing tobacco and/or areca nut, using snuff and/or paan

**Around 35 out of 100 oesophageal cancer cases (around 35%) in the UK are caused by smoking or using tobacco products.**

Smoking and drinking together further increases the risk of some oesophageal cancers more than either by itself.

Your risk increases the longer you smoke.



## Being overweight or obese

Being overweight or obese increases your risk of getting oesophageal adenocarcinoma. **Around 25 out of 100 oesophageal cancers (more than 25%) in the UK are caused by being overweight or obese.**

The more overweight you are the higher your risk.

## Alcohol

Drinking alcohol increases your risk of squamous cell oesophageal cancer.

**The more you drink, the higher your risk.**

## Barrett's oesophagus

Barrett's oesophagus is a condition where the cells lining your oesophagus have become abnormal.

The main symptom of Barrett's oesophagus is reflux, also known as gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GORD). This is where acid or juices from the stomach or small intestine escape and flow back up into the oesophagus, which often gives people heartburn. Not everyone with Barrett's oesophagus has reflux though.

Barrett's oesophagus increases your risk of oesophageal cancer, although the risk is still small.

**Between 3 and 13 people out of 100 (between 3 and 13%) with Barrett's oesophagus in the UK will develop oesophageal adenocarcinoma in their lifetime.**





# Spreading Awareness

Below is content that you can use to communicate about this campaign in newsletters, emails, websites, e-bulletins and social media.

**RM Partners North West and South West London Cancer Alliance (RMP) is supporting a campaign to help more people recognise the signs and symptoms of oesophageal cancer and to contact their GP practice early with any concerns.**

The campaign is focusing on people over the age of 45 and those from lower socio-economic groups as they are most likely to experience a late-stage cancer diagnosis.

It will also include people in this age group from Black and South Asian ethnic backgrounds, who are already at increased risk of health inequalities.

- In England, over 9,354 people are diagnosed with oesophageal cancer each year, and it is the 14th most common cancer. It is the 7th most common cause of cancer death in the UK and the 4th most common cause of cancer death for men.
- Oesophageal cancer starts in the inner lining of the oesophagus (food pipe) and can spread outward through the other layers.
- The biggest preventable cause of oesophageal cancer in the UK is smoking or using tobacco products. Smoking and drinking together further increases the risk of some oesophageal cancers more than smoking or drinking on their own.
- Knowing the symptoms is important, as the earlier oesophageal cancer is found the more treatable it's likely to be.
- Around 86% of people diagnosed with stage 1 cancer survive for 1 year or more, compared with around 24% of people who are diagnosed at stage 4.

Having symptoms doesn't necessarily mean you have oesophageal cancer, but it's still important to find out what's causing them.



# Newsletter and Web Copy

The oesophageal cancer awareness campaign, '*Whatever you call it*', highlights key symptoms of oesophageal cancer and reminds people to contact their GP practice earlier to get their symptoms checked.

## You may be more likely to get oesophageal cancer if:

- you're over 75
- you smoke
- you're overweight or obese
- you drink alcohol
- you have a condition known as Barrett's oesophagus

## Symptoms can include:

- Persistent heartburn or indigestion
- Difficulty swallowing (dysphagia)

Unfortunately, people often treat some of these symptoms with over-the-counter antacids (such as Gaviscon or Rennie) from the supermarket or chemist. This can mask a problem being found, treated, or monitored.

## Other symptoms can include:

- Losing weight without trying to
- Pain in the middle of your chest, back or between the shoulder blades, especially when swallowing
- A cough that is not getting better
- A hoarse voice
- Feeling very tired for no reason

It is important to contact your GP practice if your symptoms change, get worse or do not feel normal for you for 3 weeks or more.

**Early cancer diagnosis saves lives.**

**Visit:**

<https://oesophagealcancerawarenessmonth.com/>

**or search 'NHS Heartburn'**

**#WhateverYouCallIt #OesophagealCancerAwareness #HeartburnCancerUK**

# Social Media Copy

## Instagram

Please tag @rmpartnersnhs

## Bluesky / X

Please tag @RMPartnersNHS

## WhatsApp

For use in your own WhatsApp groups/channels.

## Suggested Content

### Suggested post 1

Know the symptoms of oesophageal cancer? Are you experiencing persistent heartburn or acid reflux? Contact your GP practice.

More info:

<https://oesophagealcancerawarenessmonth.com/> #WhateverYouCallit

### Suggested post 2

Oesophageal cancer is treatable when caught early. Don't ignore symptoms such as persistent heartburn, acid reflux or difficulty swallowing. Contact your GP practice.

Visit <https://oesophagealcancerawarenessmonth.com/> #WhateverYouCallit



Is it really  
only Heartburn?

