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Don't die of shame



By **Gabrielle Fagan**

If you pride yourself on showing a typically British reserve, and relish traditional 'fry up' foods like bacon and sausages, you could be putting your health in danger.

Those are two key factors implicated in bowel (or colon) cancer, which claims 16,000 lives a year in Britain, with lung cancer the only form of the disease to kill more.

Around 35,000 people, mostly those over 60, are diagnosed annually with the disease – which is one of the most treatable cancers, if caught early.

Yet apart from a few exceptions – including footballer Bobby Moore, TV presenters Lynn Faulds Wood and Sharon Osbourne – few well-known people have spoken out about the disease. Embarrassment generally over discussing tell-tale signs such as diarrhoea or rectal bleeding leads to thousands of victims a year not seeking help until it is too late.

EXCEPTION:

Sharon Osbourne is one of the few well-known people who have spoken out about bowel cancer.

Around 84% of people would rather ignore their symptoms than talk to their doctor, according to one survey. There's also little awareness of the role diet can play in raising risk of the disease.

Less than one in three people, according to latest research by the World Cancer Research Fund, realise that even small amounts of processed meat in the diet increase the likelihood of bowel cancer by 20%.

Charity, Bowel Cancer UK medical adviser, Dr Rob Glynne-Jones, who is Macmillan Gastro-Intestinal lead clinician at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre, Middlesex, says the outlook for countering the disease is positive.

"While there are still 100 people daily being diagnosed with bowel cancer, we are making rapid strides medically, not just with more targeted, effective treatments but also research to help prevent this disease," he says.

"Surgery and drug treatments have improved enormously over the last 10 years and nowadays around 90% of people diagnosed early survive. But in the next decade we should see dramatic improvements in survival rates, earlier detection and hopefully reductions in the numbers of those developing it."

Currently the UK has around a 15% higher rate of late diagnosis compared with other European countries, but a nationwide bowel cancer screening programme, launched in 2006, which will have full UK coverage by 2009, aims to improve this situation by detecting bowel cancer at an early stage – in people with no symptoms – when treatment is more likely to be effective.

Glynne-Jones adds: "Although it's in its early stages, bowel cancer screening is already reportedly having an effect. In Nottinghamshire, for instance, they've seen a dramatic fall in the number of emergency bowel operations. These are typically needed when a cancer is at a late stage and causing an obstruction."

He, in common with other experts in the field, believes the screening programme is key for detecting polyps too. "These are not cancers, but may develop into cancers over time. They can easily be removed, reducing the risk of bowel cancer developing."

"We hope that the screening test will evolve over time into a more sophisticated diagnostic tool and eventually be able to pick up 'tumour' DNA."

Meanwhile, research is ongoing into, among other things, the role that drugs like aspirin and even turmeric, an ingredient commonly used in curry, could play in reducing the risk of bowel cancer – although this is in its early stages and should not be experimented with at home.

Glynne-Jones says: "We're unravelling the genetic and biological disposition that people have to this cancer, and coupled with identifying lifestyle changes that may make an impact – such as exercise and a balanced diet – we're gaining ground in the fight against a disease that needlessly claims too many lives."

And he stresses: "Greater awareness – so that people get any concerns checked out and also are alert to symptoms – is vital. Bowel cancer need not kill if caught early enough."

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TV PRESENTER Lynn Faulds Wood, 60, who had bowel cancer 16 years ago, says: "Lots of us have bowel problems at some time in our lives but most symptoms do not turn out to be cancer."

She runs a charity, Lynn's Bowel Cancer Campaign, and points out that lots of people

Expert advice

have common conditions like Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) and piles, while one in 20 of us has bleeding from the bottom (rectal bleeding), especially younger people, but

most people with rectal bleeding do not have cancer.

Also, she says while bowel cancer affects one in 10 families, it doesn't mean that you're going to get it,

just because it's in your family.

She says as a rough rule of thumb: The closer any affected relatives are to you (brother, sister, mother, father, child) and the younger they are, the more you need to do something about it, like ask for screening or seek advice from a doctor.

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