

20 cancer symptoms women are most likely to ignore

Boost your chances for early detection by paying attention to your body's signs.

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Routine tests like pap smears and mammograms are important, but don't rely on tests alone to protect you from cancer. It's just as important to listen to your body and notice anything that's different, odd, or unexplainable. Although many of these symptoms could be caused by less serious conditions, they're worth getting checked out if they persist. You don't want to join the ranks of cancer patients who realize too late that symptoms they'd noticed for a long time could have sounded the alarm earlier, when cancer was easier to cure.

1. Wheezing or shortness of breath

One of the first signs lung cancer patients remember noticing when they look back is the inability to catch their breath. "I couldn't even walk across the yard without wheezing. I thought I had asthma, but how come I didn't have it before?" is how one woman described it. Thyroid cancer can also cause breathing problems if a nodule or tumor begins to press on the trachea, or windpipe. Any breathing difficulties that persist are reason to visit the doctor.

2. Chronic cough or chest pain

Several types of cancer, including leukemia and lung tumors, can cause symptoms that mimic a bad cough or bronchitis. One way to tell the difference: The problems persist, or go away and come back again in a repeating cycle. Some lung cancer patients report chest pain that extends up into the shoulder or down the arm.

3. Swallowing problems or hoarseness

Most commonly associated with esophageal or throat cancer, difficulty swallowing is sometimes one of the first signs of lung cancer, too. A hoarse or low, husky voice or the feeling of something pressing on

the throat can be an early indicator of thyroid cancer or a precancerous thyroid nodule, as can the feeling of having something stuck in your windpipe

4. Frequent fevers or infections

These can be signs of leukemia, a cancer of the blood cells that starts in the bone marrow. Leukemia causes the marrow to produce abnormal white blood cells, which crowd out healthy white cells, sapping the body's infection-fighting capabilities. Often, doctors diagnose leukemia only after the patient has been in a number of times complaining of fever, achiness, and flu-like symptoms over an extended period of time.

5. Swollen lymph nodes or lumps on the neck, underarm, or groin

Enlarged lymph nodes indicate changes in the lymphatic system, which can be a sign of cancer. For example, a lump or an enlarged lymph node under the arm is sometimes a sign of breast cancer. A painless lump on the neck, underarm, or groin can be an early sign of leukemia.

6. Bloating or abdominal weight gain -- the "my jeans don't fit" syndrome

While this might sound too common a phenomenon to be considered a cancer symptom, consider this: Women diagnosed with ovarian cancer overwhelmingly report that unexplained abdominal bloating that came on fairly suddenly and continued on and off over a long period of time (as opposed to occurring a few days each month with PMS) was one of the main ways they knew something was wrong.

7. Feeling full and unable to eat

This is another tip-off to ovarian cancer; women say they have no appetite and can't eat, even when they haven't eaten for some time. Any woman who experiences noticeable bloating or weight gain numerous times (the diagnostic criteria is more than 13 times over the period of a month) -- especially if it's accompanied by pelvic pain or feeling overly full -- should call her doctor and ask for a pelvic ultrasound.

8. Pelvic or abdominal pain

Taken by itself, pelvic pain can mean a lot of things. In fact, because it's a common symptom of fibroids, ovarian cysts, and other reproductive tract disorders, doctors don't always think of cancer when you describe pelvic pain. Make sure your doctor looks at all possible explanations and does a full exam, since pain and cramping in the pelvis and abdomen can go hand in hand with the bloating that often signals ovarian cancer. Leukemia can also cause abdominal pain resulting from an enlarged spleen.

9. Unusually heavy or painful periods or bleeding between periods

Many women reported this as the tip-off to endometrial or uterine cancer. Unfortunately, many women also said their doctors weren't responsive, overlooking or misdiagnosing their complaints as normal perimenopause. Ask for a transvaginal ultrasound if you suspect something more than routine heavy periods.

10. Rectal bleeding or blood in stool

"I thought it was hemorrhoids" is one of the most common things doctors hear when diagnosing colorectal cancer. Blood in the toilet alone is reason to call your doctor and schedule a colonoscopy.

11. Upset stomach or stomachache

As simple as it sounds, a good old-fashioned bellyache is what tipped off a number of lucky folks, whose doctors ordered ultrasounds and discovered early that they had tumors on their livers. Stomach cramps or frequent upset stomachs may indicate colorectal cancer; many cancer patients say their doctors thought they had ulcers.

12. A red, sore, or swollen breast

Everyone knows to check for lumps in the breasts, but too often symptoms closer to the surface – which can indicate inflammatory breast cancer -- are overlooked. Some women describe noticing cellulite-like dimpled skin on an area of the breast. Others noticed that a breast felt swollen, hot, or irritated. Red or purplish discoloration is also cause for concern. Call your doctor about any unexplained changes in your breasts.

13. Nipple changes

One of the most common changes women remember noticing before being diagnosed with breast cancer is a nipple that began to appear flattened, inverted, or turned sideways. "My nipple started looking like it was turned inside out," said one woman. In addition, inflammatory breast cancer also causes nipple problems, such as itchy, scaly, or crusty skin on the nipple -- so take any nipple changes seriously.

14. Excessive bruising or bleeding that doesn't stop

This symptom usually suggests something abnormal happening with the platelets and red blood cells, which can be a sign of leukemia. One woman with leukemia described bruising in strange places, such as on her fingers and hands, as well as red spots on her face, neck, and chest. Another noticed bleeding gums.

The explanation: Over time, leukemia cells crowd out red blood cells and platelets, impairing the blood's ability to carry oxygen and clot.

15. Weakness and fatigue

"I kept having to sit down at work, and one night I was too tired to drive home," said one woman in describing the fatigue that led her to discover she had leukemia. Generalized fatigue and weakness is a symptom of so many different kinds of cancer that you'll need to look at it in combination with other symptoms. But any time you feel exhausted without explanation and it doesn't respond to getting more sleep, talk to your doctor.

16. Unexplained weight loss

If you notice the pounds coming off and you haven't made changes to your diet or exercise regime, you need to ask why. Weight loss is an early sign of colon and other digestive cancers; it's also a sign of cancer that's spread to the liver, affecting your appetite and the ability of your body to rid itself of wastes.

17. Swelling of facial features

Some patients with lung cancer report noticing puffiness, swelling, or redness in the face. The explanation for this is that small-cell lung tumors commonly block blood vessels in the chest, preventing blood from flowing freely from the head and face.

18. A sore or skin lump that doesn't heal, becomes crusty, or bleeds easily

Most of us know to watch moles for changes that might indicate skin cancer. But other signs, such as small waxy lumps or dry scaly patches, are easier to miss. Familiarize yourself with the different types of skin cancer -- melanoma, basal cell carcinoma, and squamous cell carcinoma -- and be vigilant about checking skin all over the body for odd-looking growths or spots.

19. Changes in nails

Unexplained changes to the fingernails can be a sign of several types of cancer. A brown or black streak or dot under the nail can indicate skin cancer, while newly discovered "clubbing" -- enlargement of the ends of the fingers, with nails that curve down over the tips -- can be a sign of lung cancer. Pale or white nails can be an indication that your liver is not functioning properly, sometimes a sign of liver cancer.

20. Pain in the back or lower right side

As vague as this sounds, many cancer patients say this was the first sign of liver cancer, known as one of the "silent killers" (another is ovarian cancer). Patients diagnosed with pancreatic cancer often recall having had chronic back pain unrelieved by painkillers. Breast cancer is also often diagnosed via back pain, which can occur when a breast tumor presses backward into the chest, or when the cancer spreads to the spine or ribs.