

15 Cancer Symptoms Men Ignore

Men, heed these possible clues and find cancer early, when it's most treatable.

By: Laura Martin, MD

Experts state that men could benefit greatly by being alert to certain cancer symptoms that may require a trip to the doctor's office sooner rather than later. But when it comes to scheduling doctor visits, men are notorious foot-draggers.

Leonard Lichtenfeld, MD, is deputy chief medical officer for the national office of the American Cancer Society. According to Lichtenfeld, men often need to be pushed by women to get screened for cancer. That's unfortunate. Routine preventative care can find cancer and other diseases in their early stages. When cancer is found early, there are more options for treatment. That means there are also better chances for a cure.

Some cancer symptoms in men are specific. They involve certain body parts and may point directly to the possibility of cancer. Other symptoms, though, are vague. For instance, pain that affects many body parts could have many explanations. It may or may not be a sign of cancer. You can't rule out cancer without seeing a doctor.

Cancer Symptom in Men #1: Breast Mass

If you're like most men, you've probably never considered the possibility of breast cancer. Although it's not common, it is possible. Any new mass in the breast area of a man needs to be checked out by a physician. In addition, the American Cancer Society (ACS) identifies several other worrisome signs involving the breast that men as well as women should take note of, including:

- Skin dimpling or puckering
- Nipple retraction
- Redness or scaling of the nipple or breast skin
- Nipple discharge

When you consult your doctor about any of these signs, expect him to take a careful history and do a physical exam. Depending on the findings, your doctor may order a mammogram, biopsy or other tests.

Cancer Symptom #2: Pain

As people age, complaints of increasing aches and pains may begin. Pain, as vague as it may be can be an early symptom of some cancers. Most pain complaints however, are not from cancer. Any pain that persists, according to the ACS, should be checked out by your physician to decide whether further testing is necessary. If it's not cancer, you still benefit from the office visit because the doctor can work with you to find out the cause and determine proper treatment.

Cancer Symptom #3: Changes in Testicles

Testicular cancer occurs most often in men aged 29-39. The American Cancer Society recommends men get a testicular exam by a doctor as part of a routine cancer-related checkup. Some doctors also suggest a monthly self-exam. Being aware of troublesome testicular symptoms between exams is wise. Any change in the size of the testicles, such as growth or shrinkage should be a concern. In addition, any swelling, lump, or feeling of heaviness in the scrotum should not be ignored. Some testicular cancers occur very quickly so early detection is especially crucial. Your doctor should do a testicular exam and an overall assessment of your health. If cancer is suspected, blood tests may be ordered as well as ultrasound and biopsy.

Cancer Symptom in Men #4: Changes in Lymph Nodes

If you notice a lump or swelling in the lymph nodes under your armpit, your neck, or anywhere else – it could be a reason for concern. If you have a lymph node that gets progressively larger, and it's been longer than a month, see a doctor. Your doctor should examine you and determine any associated issues that could explain the lymph node enlargement, such as an infection. If there is no infection, a doctor will typically order a biopsy.

Cancer Symptom #5: Fever

If you've got an unexplained fever, it may indicate cancer. Fever, though, may also be a sign of pneumonia or some other illness or infection that needs treatment. Most cancers will cause fever at some point. Often, fever occurs after the cancer has spread from its original site and invaded another part of the body. Fever can also be caused by blood cancers such as lymphoma or leukemia according to the American Cancer Society. Don't ignore a fever that can't be explained. See your doctor for cause and proper treatment.

Cancer Symptom #6: Weight Loss Without Trying

Unexpected weight loss is a concern...most of us do not lose weight easily. This is weight loss of more than simply a few pounds from a stepped-up exercise program or from eating less because of a busy schedule. If a man loses more than 10% of his body weight in a 3-6 month time period it's time to see the doctor. Your doctor should do a general physical exam, ask questions about your diet and exercise and decide if other tests are warranted.

Cancer Symptom #7: Gnawing Abdominal Pain & Depression

Any man (or woman) who's got pain in the abdomen and is feeling depressed needs a checkup. Experts have found a link between depression and pancreatic cancer. Other symptoms of pancreatic cancer may include jaundice, a change in stool color – often gray – a darkening of the urine and itching over the whole body. Expect your doctor to do a careful physical exam and history. Your physician may order such diagnostic tests as ultrasound, CT scan or both, as well as other laboratory tests.

Cancer Symptom #8: Fatigue

Fatigue is another vague symptom that could point to cancer in men but many other problems could cause fatigue as well. Like fever (#5), fatigue can set in after the cancer has grown but according to the ACS, it may happen early in cancers such as leukemia, colon cancer, or stomach cancer. If you often feel extremely tired and you don't get better with rest check with your doctor who can evaluate the fatigue along with any other symptoms in order to determine its cause and proper treatment.

Cancer Symptom #9: Persistent Cough

Coughs are expected with colds, the flu, and allergies. They are also a side effect of a medication. A very prolonged cough – defined as lasting more than three or four weeks – or a change in cough should not be ignored. These cough patterns warrant a visit to your doctor since they could be a symptom of cancer or they could indicate some other problem such as chronic bronchitis or acid reflux. Your doctor should take a careful history, examine your throat, listen to your lungs, determine their function with a spirometry test and, if you're a smoker, order x-rays. Once the reason for coughing is identified treatment can be determined.

Cancer Symptom #10: Difficulty Swallowing

Some men report difficulty swallowing but then ignore it, according to Dr. Lichtenfeld. Over time they change their diet to more liquid than solid. Swallowing difficulties may be a sign of gastrointestinal cancer, such as cancer of the esophagus. Let your doctor know if you're having trouble swallowing. Your doctor should take a careful history and possibly order a chest x-ray and a barium swallow. Your doctor may also refer you to a specialist for an upper GI endoscopy to examine your esophagus and upper GI tract.

Cancer Symptom #11: Changes In The Skin

You should be alert to not only changes in moles – a well-known sign of potential skin cancer – but also changes in skin pigmentation. Suddenly developing bleeding on your skin or excessive scaling are reasons to check with your doctor. It's difficult to say how long is too long to observe skin changes but oncologists at Fox Chase Cancer Center recommend not to wait longer than several weeks. To find out what's causing the skin changes your doctor should take a careful history and perform a physical exam. A biopsy may also be ordered to rule out cancer.

Cancer Symptom #12: Blood Where It Shouldn't Be

Anytime you see blood coming from a body part where you've never seen it before, see a doctor. If you start coughing up blood, spitting up blood, have blood in stool or in urine, it's time for a doctor visit. It's a mistake to assume blood in the stool is simply from a hemorrhoid, it could be colon cancer. Your physician should ask questions about your symptoms and order diagnostic testing such as a colonoscopy. The purpose of a colonoscopy is to identify any signs of cancer or pre-cancer or identify any other causes of the bleeding.

Cancer Symptom #13: Mouth Changes

If you smoke or chew tobacco, you need to be especially alert for any white patches inside your mouth or white spots on your tongue. Those changes may indicate leukoplakia, a pre-cancerous area that can occur with ongoing irritation. This condition can progress to oral cancer. You should report the changes to your doctor or dentist who should take a careful history, examine the changes, and then decide what other tests may be needed.

Cancer Symptom #14: Urinary Problems

As men age (and women), urinary problems become more frequent. Problems may include the following:

- Urge to urinate more often, especially at night.
- A sense of urgency.
- A feeling of not completely emptying the bladder.
- Inability to start the urine stream.
- Urine leaking when laughing or coughing.
- A weakening of the urine stream.

Your doctor should do a digital rectal exam to check the prostate gland for enlargement or for nodules. The prostate gland often enlarges as a man ages. It is most often caused by a non-cancerous condition called benign prostatic hyperplasia or BPH. Your doctor may discuss doing a blood test to check the level of prostate-specific antigen or PSA. PSA is a protein produced by the prostate gland and the test is used to help determine the possibility of prostate cancer. If the doctor notices abnormalities in the prostate or if the PSA is higher than it should be your doctor may refer you to a urologist and perhaps order a biopsy. Note that prostate cancer may be present even with a normal PSA level.

Cancer Symptom #15: Indigestion

Many men, especially as they get older think “heart attack” when they get bad indigestion. Persistent indigestion may point to cancer of the esophagus, throat, or stomach. Persistent or worsening indigestion should be reported to your doctor. Your doctor should take a careful history and ask questions about the indigestion episodes. Based on the history and your answers to the questions, the doctor will decide what tests are needed.

