

Why Heartburn can be #MoreThanJustHeartburn

Heartburn is a part of daily life for many people, but few are aware of the risks of experiencing heartburn long-term.

Christmas overindulgence is a byword for heartburn – also known as acid reflux or indigestion. Almost everyone knows that uncomfortable feeling in the chest or the nasty taste in the mouth after eating something too fast or having a late-night meal. While it is easy to dismiss it as a fierce discomfort, quickly dispelled by some off-the-shelf medicine, persistent heartburn could be a sign of something more serious. Not a lot of people know that it can also be a sign of cancer or a potentially pre-cancerous condition – Barrett's oesophagus – that can be monitored to check that it does not turn into something more life-threatening.

In the UK, most new cases of this cancer are found in men, with the risks rising for those in their 40s and 50s. This represents the majority of the workforce in the UK's offshore energy industry, as reported in Offshore Energy UK's 2023 Health & Safety report. Additionally, in 2015, 27% of oesophageal cancer cases were linked to weight or obesity. This issue remains relevant today with the industry body noting that one in ten of the offshore workforce fail their medicals owing to their weight or body mass index.

These statistics suggest an overlap between the age and lifestyle risk factors for oesophageal cancer, and the profile of many offshore workers. Although the data does not indicate that offshore workers have a higher incidence of this cancer, it does emphasise the importance of raising awareness and encouraging regular health checks in this industry.

In an interview with Fiona Labrooy from Heartburn Cancer UK (HCUK), a charity dedicated to raising awareness of oesophageal cancer and its potential warning signs such as persistent heartburn, she was asked all the questions you would like answered about heartburn and its potential link to cancer.



Fiona Labrooy, HCUK

What causes heartburn?

The things you eat and drink get to your stomach by travelling down the oesophagus – which is sometimes also called the gullet or the food pipe. At the bottom of the oesophagus is a muscular ring – a sphincter – which normally acts as a one-way valve, keeping food, drink and stomach acids where they should be. When this valve doesn't work properly (for lots of reasons), acid leaks back up into the oesophagus, and sometimes the mouth, and causes the pain and irritation that we know as heartburn (or indigestion or acid reflux, it's different names for the same thing).

Why is it important to find out if there's an issue early?

Oesophageal cancer is the seventh biggest cancer killer in the UK and fourth biggest for men. And, because it's often missed – people don't know or they ignore the warning signs, such as persistent heartburn or cough

Heartburn isn't always harmless

If you suffer from persistent heartburn and/or frequent difficulty swallowing, **see a doctor**

HCUK
HEARTBURN
CANCER UK

Is it really
only Heartburn?

Oesophageal Cancer,
raising awareness, **changing** the future

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– it is often discovered late, when it has spread. By that time, it may be too late to cure and very difficult to treat. Long term, persistent acid reflux/heartburn that's unresolved through treatment or simple lifestyle changes can cause the change in the cells that develops into cancer as well as be a symptom of oesophageal cancer.

Why is it good news... in some ways... to find out that you have Barrett's oesophagus?

Finding out you have this pre-cancerous condition could be seen as a gift. Most people with Barrett's don't go on to develop cancer. But people who have it are normally monitored regularly to check that the cell changes don't develop into cancer.

What can people do to help themselves, and where can they get more information?

Lifestyle changes are often enough to stop people getting heartburn in the first place. This can include

not eating late at night, losing a bit of weight around our bellies and avoiding or reducing triggers such as spicy food or alcohol. You can find more on this at our website www.heartburncanceruk.org where there's also a lot more advice and support.

By being aware of the early signs and symptoms and getting checked out early, we can increase early diagnosis and survival rates. In 2015, 59% of all oesophageal cancer cases in the UK were preventable and we need your help to make sure as many of those cases as possible are caught.

Getting tested if you are experiencing symptoms of Barrett's oesophagus and oesophageal cancer can help you get diagnosed early, or provide peace of mind that all is well.

Know the symptoms, be heartburn aware and get diagnosed early.
Search www.heartburncanceruk.org for more information.