

About Anal Cancer - A Quick Guide



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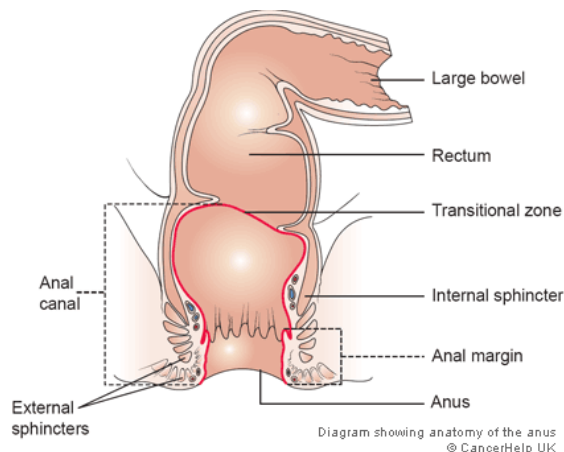
This is a brief summary of the information on 'About anal cancer' from CancerHelp UK. You will find more detailed information on the website.

In this information there are sections on

- The anus
- Risks and causes of anal cancer
- Screening for anal cancer
- Symptoms of anal cancer
- Types of anal cancer
- Should I see an anal cancer specialist?
- Questions for your doctor

The anus

The anus is part of the large bowel that opens to the outside of the body. It is the tube that your stools pass through as you empty your bowels.



The cells of the anus

The lining of the anus is made of flat skin-like cells called squamous cells. Most anal cancers are squamous cell cancers.

Risks and causes of anal cancer

Anal cancer is rare. It is slightly more common in women than men. We don't know the cause of anal cancer but there are several risk factors.

Human papilloma virus (HPV)

There are over 100 different types of HPV. Some types are passed on from one person to another through sexual contact. Around 8 out of 10 (80%) people diagnosed with anal cancer have evidence of HPV infection.

Other risk factors

Apart from getting older, other possible risk factors include having had cervical cancer or abnormal cervical cells in the past, vaginal cancer, some types of sexually transmitted disease, smoking, and lowered immunity.

Screening for anal cancer

Screening means testing for early stages of a disease before there are any symptoms.

Before doctors can screen for any type of cancer, they must have an accurate test to use. The test must be reliable in picking up



cancers that are there. And it must not give false positive results in people who do not have cancer. At the moment, we don't have a suitable test to use for anal cancer screening.

If you think you are at higher than average risk for anal cancer, talk to your doctor, you may be able to have regular check ups.

Symptoms of anal cancer

The symptoms of anal cancer can be similar to other problems of the anus, for example piles (haemorrhoids) or anal fissures.

The most common symptom is bleeding from the back passage (rectal bleeding). Other symptoms can include

- Small lumps around the anus, which may look like piles
- Pain in the anal area or the sensation of a lump there
- Discharge of mucus from the back passage
- Difficulty in controlling your bowels (faecal incontinence)
- A lump (or lumps) in the groin

But 1 in 5 (20%) people diagnosed with anal cancer have no symptoms.

Remember - anal cancer is rare, so if you have any of these symptoms they are more likely to be caused by something else. But it is still important to report them to your doctor.

Types of anal cancer

There are several different types of anal cancer.

Squamous cell cancer

About 8 out of 10 (80%) anal cancers are squamous cell cancers. Squamous cells are flat cells that line the organs and cavities of the body.

There are several different types of squamous cell anal cancer. They are sometimes called epidermoid cancers. All the squamous cell types of anal cancer are treated in the same way.

Other anal cancers

The other, rarer types of anal cancer are adenocarcinoma, basal cell carcinoma and melanoma.

Should I see an anal cancer specialist?

It can be very difficult for GPs to decide who may have a suspected cancer and who has something much less serious. Anal symptoms are very common, and are not usually caused by cancer. But there are particular combinations of symptoms that mean your GP should refer you to a specialist straight away. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) says that the following symptoms may need urgent referral for possible cancer of the anus

- Bleeding from the back passage that has lasted 6 weeks or longer (particularly if you have no itching or soreness)
- A lump that the GP can feel in your rectum (not in your abdomen)
- Anaemia without a known cause

According to Department of Health guidelines, you should ideally get an appointment within 2 weeks for an urgent referral.



If you have symptoms and you do not think your GP is taking them seriously enough, you could print out this page and take it to your appointment. You may be able to decide together whether you need to see a specialist, and how soon.

What to ask your doctor about anal cancer

- How will I know if I have cancer of the anus?
- What increases my risk of getting anal cancer?
- Can I be screened for anal cancer?
- What are the symptoms of anal cancer?
- What type of anal cancer do I have?
- My father had anal cancer. Am I at increased risk of getting it?

More information

For more information about anal cancer, visit our website <http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. You can view or print the information in a larger size if you need to.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on **0808 800 4040** 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday

Adapted from Cancer Research UK's Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in October 2010. CancerHelp UK is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through CancerHelp UK and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. © Cancer Research UK 2010. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464) and in Scotland (SC041666).