



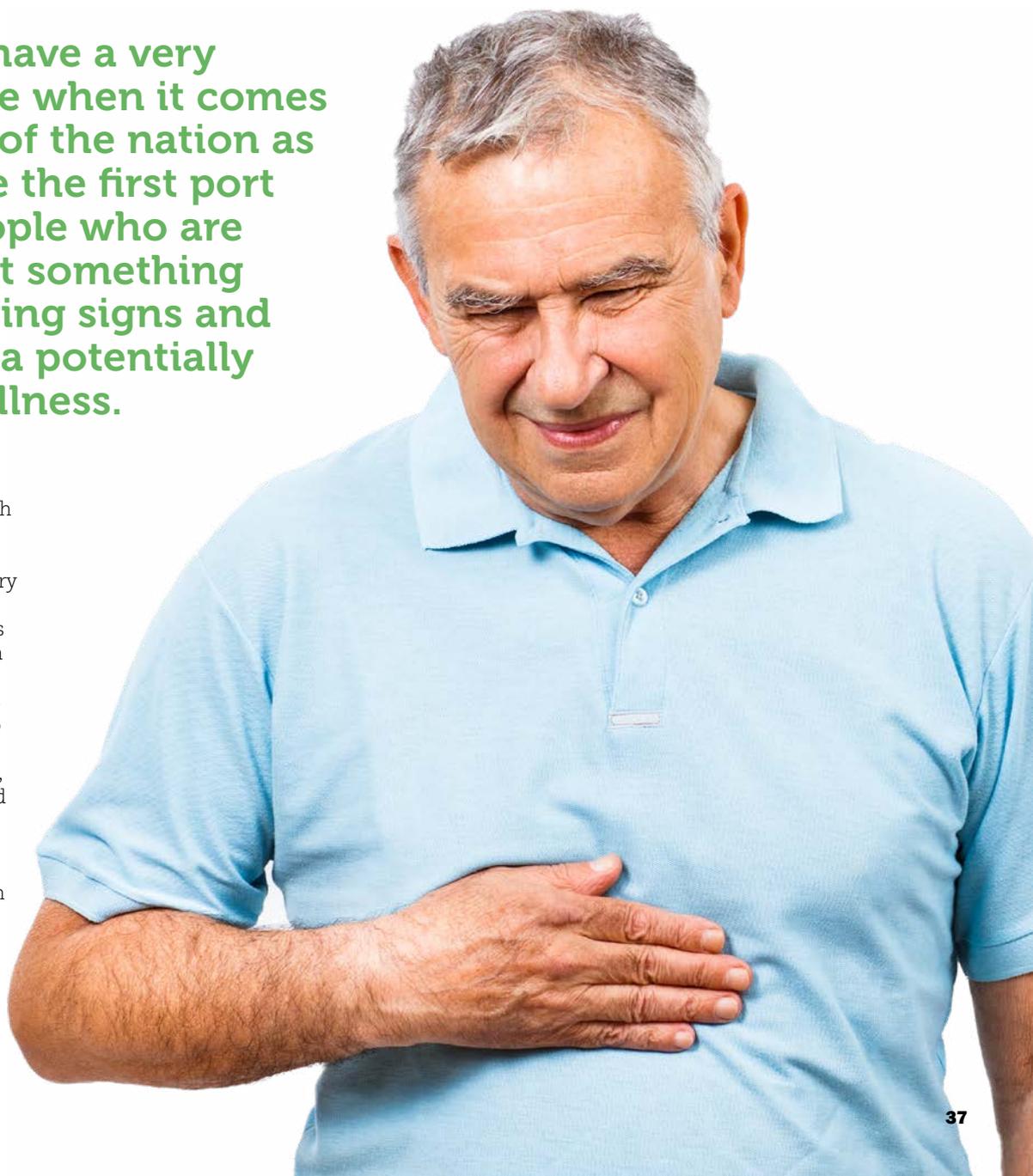
The role of pharmacists in bowel cancer awareness



Pharmacists have a very important role when it comes to the health of the nation as they often are the first port of call for people who are worried about something or are displaying signs and symptoms of a potentially very serious illness.

The Irish Cancer Society works with a huge number of pharmacies around the country and we are very much aware of how vital they are in terms of giving advice and direction to cancer patients and their families. Because of that, it is always welcome to be able to outline the various elements of a particular type of cancer, in this case bowel cancer, and to give an overview of things like signs and symptoms, bowel health and the value of screening programmes – in this case *BowelScreen*.

Over 2,700 people are diagnosed with bowel cancer every year in Ireland. It is the second most common



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cancer in men and the third most common cancer in women in Ireland. More than 1,000 people die from the disease every year, making it the second most common cause of cancer death in this country.

However, if found early, bowel cancer is very treatable. Analysis has shown that approximately 95% of patients diagnosed at Stage 1 are alive five years later, compared to 12% at Stage IV. This simply reinforces the message that people need to be aware of the signs and symptoms so that they can speak to their GP or healthcare professional if they have any worries at all.

The symptoms of bowel cancer can include any of the following:

- Blood in your bowel motion or bleeding from the back passage;
- A lasting change (more than a month) in your normal bowel motion, such as diarrhoea or constipation;
- Feeling that you have not emptied your bowel fully after a motion;
- Pain or discomfort in your abdomen (tummy) or back passage;
- Trapped wind or fullness in your tummy;
- Weight loss for no reason; and
- Ongoing general tiredness or weakness.

It is important to remember that these symptoms can also be for conditions other than bowel cancer but it is still vital that if anyone presents to a pharmacy with any of the above, that they are advised to get checked by their doctor.

As a way of encouraging people to be aware of the signs and symptoms of bowel cancer, the Irish Cancer Society developed an online *Bowel Health Checker*, which can be accessed on www.cancer.ie/bowelhealth. It is a short quiz designed to inform people about staying healthy, being aware of their bowel health and informing people about the signs and symptoms of bowel cancer. Once completed, there is a handy print-out to take to your doctor should it be needed.

The exact cause of bowel cancer is unknown, but it is much more common in those over 60 years of age. Your risk of getting bowel cancer is higher if you eat a diet high in fats and low in fruit, vegetables and fibre; you are obese or overweight; you have had a previous bowel cancer; a member of your immediate family (mother, father, brother or sister) or relatives (aunt or uncle) has had bowel cancer; you or someone in your family has or had polyps or a condition called familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP) or hereditary nonpolyposis colorectal cancer (HNPCC); or you have a history of bowel conditions like ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease.

As is the case for 4 in 10 cancers, there are ways that people can reduce their risk. The first one is to have a healthy diet and limit the amount of red and processed meat that they eat. Connected to this is the need to avoid being overweight or obese and ensuring that a healthy body weight is maintained. The third way is to increase the amount of fibre eaten and trying to consume at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day. Fourth is being physically active for at least 30 minutes every day – this can include taking the stairs instead of the lift or getting out on a lunchbreak for a walk. Other ways to reduce your risk include not smoking and limiting the amount of alcohol that is consumed. Finally, everyone should be aware of their family history of cancer – if there is a history, it is advised to have a conversation with your doctor about screening.

Bowel cancer screening is used to detect cancer in people who have no symptoms and it helps to detect bowel cancer at an early stage, when there is a much better chance of treating it successfully.

BowelScreen is the national bowel screening programme in Ireland and is open to people in the 60 – 69 year-old age group. Men and women who are called for screening and who are willing to take part in the screening programme are sent a home test kit called FIT (Faecal Immunochemical Test) in the post, which is a simple test carried out in their own homes. If test results are

abnormal, the person will be referred to the hospital for a screening colonoscopy to determine any abnormality in the bowel.

At the moment, uptake of *BowelScreen* is at about 40% and we really need to be up around the 50 – 60% uptake mark so that we can expand the programme to a larger age cohort.

Pharmacists can play a really important role here in encouraging their patients to take part in the programme, if they are eligible, and to advise them that in the majority of cases, tests come back normal. Screening is essential in diagnosing cancers at an early stage and can also identify pre-cancerous conditions and treat them before they develop. *BowelScreen* has identified 13,000 pre-cancerous conditions and therefore has effectively stopped 13,000 cancers from developing – this is a really positive message to send out.

We would encourage anyone who has concerns about any aspect of bowel cancer to speak to a cancer nurse at the Cancer Nurseline on Freephone 1800 200 700, on email cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie or drop into one of our 13 Daffodil Centres in hospitals nationwide. For locations and opening times, email daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie.

For more information on *BowelScreen*, call Freephone 1800 45 45 55 or visit www.bowelscreen.ie.