

Community Toolkit

Introduction

Tobacco remains the biggest cause of cancer and preventable death in the UK and worldwide. Although lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer death in the UK, accounting for around 19% of all cancer deaths, the harms of tobacco extend far beyond the lungs. Smoking tobacco is linked to at least 16 different types of cancer. Despite these risks, non-cigarette tobacco products are often perceived as less harmful than cigarettes.

RM Partners North West and South West London Cancer Alliance, supported by Cancer Research UK, is launching a new awareness campaign on the cancer risks associated with tobacco use, including shisha (hookah) and the different types of chewing/smokeless tobacco.

The campaign aims to raise awareness of the different types of tobacco and its harms, promote recognition of the most common tobacco-related cancers signs and symptoms and encourage prompt help-seeking to GP practices and use of local tobacco cessation services.

The campaign ‘It Still Counts’ will run across all 14 boroughs in north west and south west London on bus shelters, underground stations, social media and online search engines and will be supported by local community activity and healthcare professionals.

The tobacco-related cancer campaign will run from November 2026 until March 2027.

Role of Community Organisations

Community organisations are trusted voices within their communities and play a vital role in promoting awareness of the harms of all forms of tobacco use. Through their established relationships and cultural understanding, they can help reach people who may not routinely engage with health services, start meaningful conversations about tobacco use, and encourage individuals to access support to quit.

By supporting this campaign, community organisations can help challenge misconceptions about non-cigarette tobacco products, promote healthier behaviours, and reduce health inequalities. This toolkit provides practical resources to support culturally sensitive engagement and empower communities to make informed decisions about their health.

Within the communities I work with, naswar and shisha carry no stigma and are often seen as a normal part of everyday life.

As a result, many people do not mention it when asked if they smoke because they do not view it as the type of tobacco the question refers to.

By asking specifically about products such as naswar or shisha, community leaders can help raise awareness of the risks and start important conversations that might otherwise never happen.



Sasan Shekarestan
Director Mehr Health CIC

Key Facts About Non-Cigarette Tobacco Use

Non-cigarette tobacco products can cause cancer

- Smoking shisha can increase the risk of lung cancer. It increases the risk of other cancer types like mouth, oesophageal (food-pipe) and stomach cancers.
- Smokeless tobacco causes mouth, oesophageal (food-pipe) and pancreatic cancers, and potentially other types.

Non-cigarette tobacco products are not a safe alternative

- Many people believe products such as shisha, paan, gutkha or chewing tobacco are safer than cigarettes, but they still contain tobacco and can harm health.
- Research has shown that you can inhale the same amount of smoke in a 45-minute shisha session as if you smoked 100 cigarettes. Smoking shisha has many of the same health risks as smoking cigarettes due to the presence of cancer-causing chemicals. Even tobacco-free shisha smoke contains carbon monoxide and harmful chemicals that can cause cancer.
- Betel nut can cause mouth, oesophagus (food-pipe) and throat cancer even if used without adding tobacco.

Tobacco-related cancers affect some communities more than others

- The proportion of cancers caused by smoking is over two times higher in the most deprived communities in England than in the least deprived.

Many people do not realise the risks

- Some non-cigarette tobacco products are used during social occasions, celebrations or cultural traditions, which can make them seem less harmful.
- Many people are unaware that these products contain tobacco and nicotine, making them addictive and difficult to stop using.
- Passive smoking (also known as secondhand smoking) is when you breathe in other people's tobacco smoke. This includes second-hand smoke from shisha pipes, cigars and bidis, which is dangerous because it contains harmful substances like carbon monoxide, toxic chemicals, and toxic particles.

Use of non-cigarette tobacco products is increasing

- The number of people using non-cigarette tobacco products has increased in recent years.
- Shisha cafés and waterpipe venues have also become more common across the UK.

People may not describe themselves as smokers

- Many people who use shisha, chewing tobacco, naswar, paan or similar products do not consider themselves smokers.
- As a result, they may not mention their tobacco use when asked about smoking, which can mean they miss opportunities to access support.

Examples of non-cigarette tobacco products used across different communities

This table highlights tobacco products that may be encountered in different communities.

 **Shisha** *(hookah, waterpipe, narghile or hubble-bubble)*	Smoking device used to inhale heated, flavoured tobacco through a waterpipe. Products include tobacco-based mixtures and “herbal” alternatives. Evidence suggests that smoke from both types contains harmful toxins and chemicals that can negatively affect health.
Common user communities	• Arab • Pakistani • Bangladeshi • Popular among younger people in the UK
Traditional use	Commonly shared in social and family settings, including shisha cafés, lounges and private homes.
 **Cigars**	Cigars are made primarily from fermented and dried tobacco leaves. They are typically smoked by drawing smoke into the mouth rather than inhaling deeply.
Common user communities	Used across all ethnic groups.
Traditional use	Traditionally associated with celebration and hospitality across a range of cultures. Widely available from different channels (supermarkets, tobacconists, etc).



Paan (Betel quid)
Including areca/betel nut

Preparation is made by wrapping areca nut, slaked lime, and sometimes tobacco or sweeteners in a betel leaf. When it contains tobacco, it is known as tambaku paan. Paan is chewed slowly and either spat out or occasionally swallowed.

Paan is associated with an increased risk of cancer even when it does not contain tobacco, as areca nut is a recognised carcinogen.

In the UK, it is available through South Asian retailers and restaurants.

Common user communities

- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Sri Lankan
- Nepalese

Traditional use

Usually consumed in social and dining settings as a palate cleanser and digestive aid.

In the UK, it is available through South Asian retailers and restaurants.



Gutkha
(Jarda)

Product made from tobacco, areca nut, slaked lime, and flavourings.

Chewed and held in the mouth to release nicotine and stimulant effects.

Common user communities

- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi

Traditional use

Commonly used in social and community settings.

It is commercially manufactured and available through some South Asian shops.



Naswar
(Nas, Niswar)

A moist, green, powdered smokeless tobacco made from sun-dried tobacco leaves with slaked lime, ash, and occasionally flavourings or colourants.

Consumed orally, often as small balls placed under the tongue to absorb nicotine.

Common user communities

- Afghan
- Pakistani
- Uzbek
- Tajik
- Iranian

Traditional use

Largely used by men, it is often offered to guests as a sign of hospitality and shared through social networks.

It cannot be sold legally in the UK. As a result, it is often supplied informally through community and social networks, in plain, unlabelled plastic bags without health warnings.



Bidi

Thin, hand-rolled cigarette made from tobacco wrapped in a dried brown tendu leaf.

Smoked like a conventional cigarette.

Common user communities

- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi

Traditional use

Commonly smoked by adults in social and community gatherings.

In the UK, it may be available through specialist South Asian retailers and is subject to the same regulations as other cigarettes.

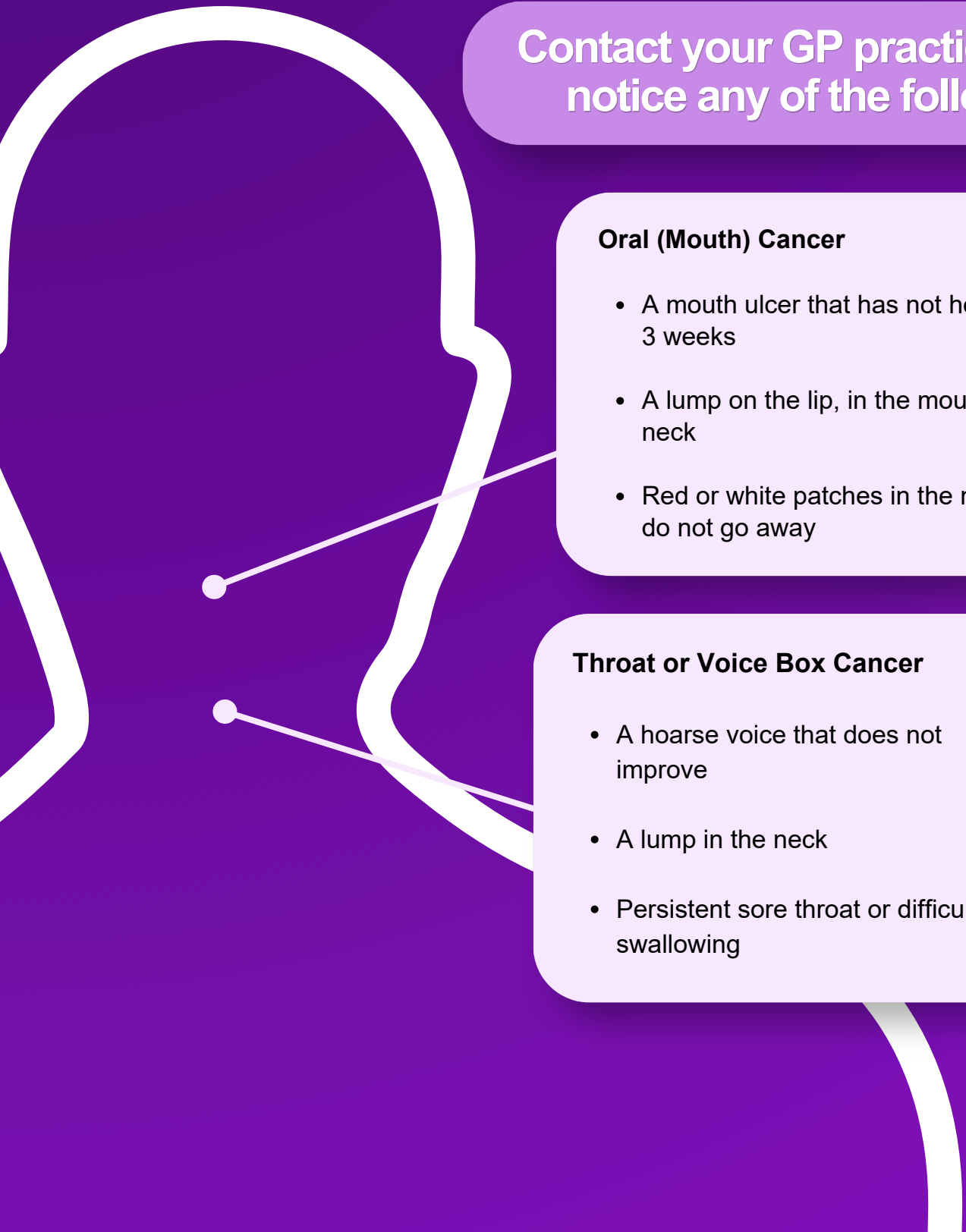
Cancers associated with tobacco products

All tobacco products can harm health and increase the risk of cancer. Smoking tobacco causes at least 16 different types of cancer, however, the below table shows strong evidence of an association with non-cigarette tobacco products and specific cancer types.

✓ Strong evidence of an association * Potential links but further research is needed	Tobacco smoking (cigarettes, cigars, cigarillos, shisha, bidi)	Paan	Gutkha	Naswar
Bladder	✓			
Bowel	✓			
Breast	*			
Cervix	✓			
Kidney	✓			
Larynx	✓			
Leukaemia (AML and CML)	✓			
Liver	✓	*		
Lung	✓	*		
Nasal cavity	✓			
Oesophagus	✓	✓	✓	✓
Oral	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ovarian	✓			
Pancreas	✓		✓	✓
Pharynx	✓	✓		
Stomach	✓			

Symptoms of tobacco-related cancer

Anyone who uses tobacco, including shisha, naswar, gutkha, paan, bidis or cigars, should be aware of possible cancer symptoms. It is important to get them checked by a healthcare professional, especially if they do not go away. Below are some of the most common symptoms of tobacco-related cancers.



Contact your GP practice if you notice any of the following

Oral (Mouth) Cancer

- A mouth ulcer that has not healed after 3 weeks
- A lump on the lip, in the mouth or in the neck
- Red or white patches in the mouth that do not go away

Throat or Voice Box Cancer

- A hoarse voice that does not improve
- A lump in the neck
- Persistent sore throat or difficulty swallowing

Food Pipe (Oesophageal) Cancer

- Difficulty swallowing food or drinks
- Pain when swallowing
- Persistent indigestion or heartburn, especially if accompanied by weight loss

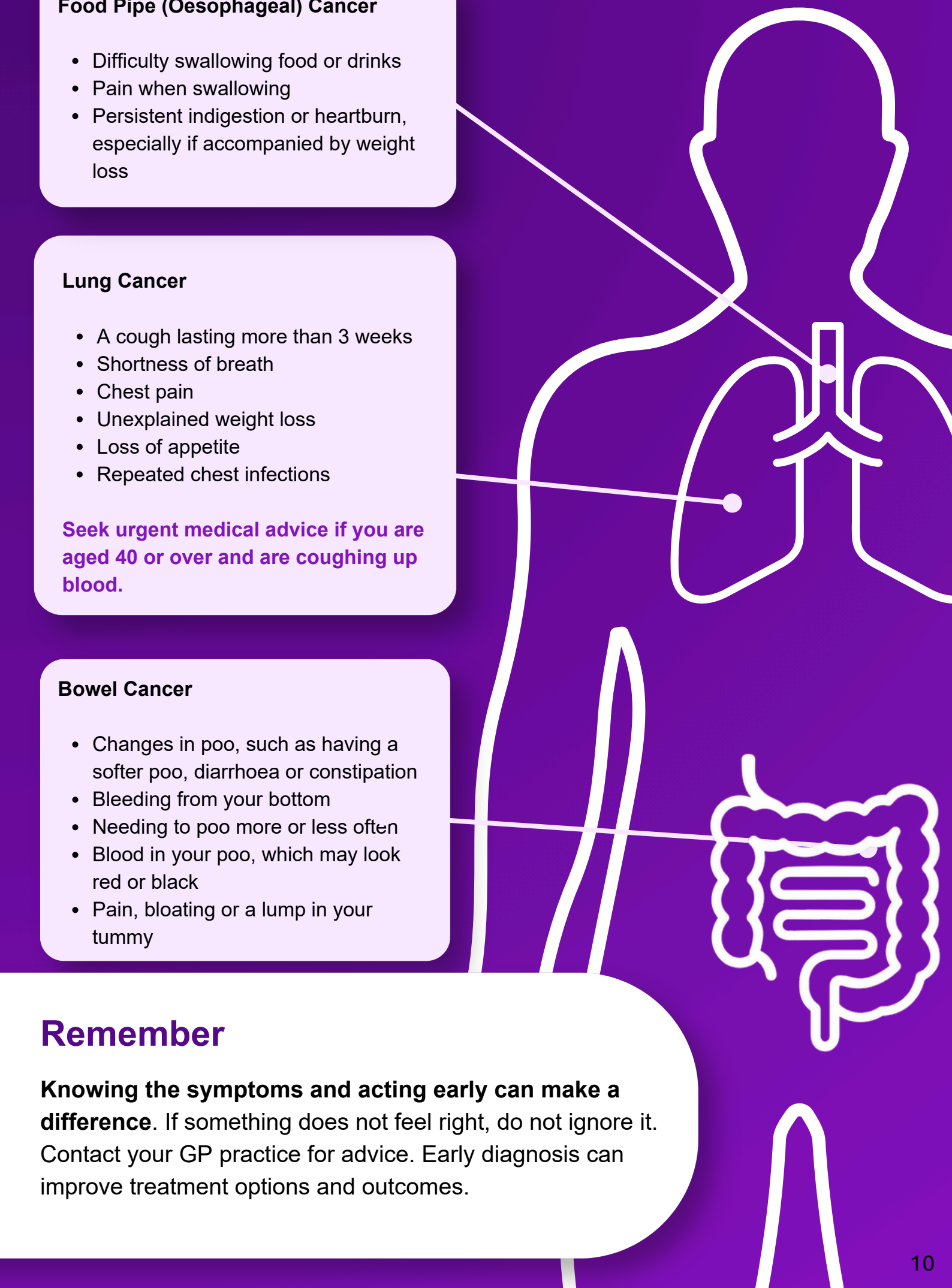
Lung Cancer

- A cough lasting more than 3 weeks
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Unexplained weight loss
- Loss of appetite
- Repeated chest infections

Seek urgent medical advice if you are aged 40 or over and are coughing up blood.

Bowel Cancer

- Changes in poo, such as having a softer poo, diarrhoea or constipation
- Bleeding from your bottom
- Needing to poo more or less often
- Blood in your poo, which may look red or black
- Pain, bloating or a lump in your tummy



Remember

Knowing the symptoms and acting early can make a difference. If something does not feel right, do not ignore it. Contact your GP practice for advice. Early diagnosis can improve treatment options and outcomes.

Community Conversations About Tobacco Use

Community leaders are trusted voices within their communities and can play an important role in raising awareness of the harms of all forms of tobacco use. Simple, supportive conversations can help people understand the risks, challenge common misconceptions, and encourage those who use tobacco to seek support when they are ready.

Opportunities to start conversations may arise during:

- Community events and gatherings
- Health and wellbeing activities
- Faith and cultural gatherings
- Support groups and community meetings
- One-to-one conversations with service users, members, or families

A Simple Conversation Approach

These conversations do not need to be long or formal. They can follow three simple steps.

Ask

- Gently ask whether the person uses any form of tobacco, such as shisha, naswar, gutkha, paan, chewing tobacco, cigars or cigarettes.

Raise Awareness

- Share that all forms of tobacco can harm health and increase the risk of cancer and other serious illnesses.
- Explain that many non-cigarette tobacco products are often seen as less harmful, but they can still contain tobacco and harmful chemicals.

Encourage Action

- Encourage people to consider quitting or reducing their tobacco use.
- Signpost them to their GP practice, community pharmacy, local stop smoking service, or other sources of support.

Key Message

You do not need to be a healthcare professional to make a difference. A friendly, non-judgemental conversation can help someone better understand the risks of tobacco use and feel more confident about seeking support when they are ready.

Referral pathways and support services

Local stop smoking services may support people who use shisha and smokeless tobacco products, but this varies by area.

Where support for non-cigarette tobacco products is not clearly stated, people can contact their local stop smoking service directly to confirm eligibility, referral pathways and available support. They can also contact their local GP practice, pharmacy or dental practice.

Find out more at: https://stopsmokinglondon.com/support/

Spreading the message

The copy below can be used to help spread the message across social media.

- **Bluesky / X:** Please tag **@RMPartnersNHS**
- **Instagram:** Please tag **@rmpartnersnhs** and **@cr_uk**
- **WhatsApp:** For use in your own WhatsApp groups and channels.

Bluesky / X - Suggested Post 1

Only smoke shisha socially or on holiday? It still counts. Even occasional shisha use exposes you to tobacco and harmful smoke. Smoking shisha may at least double the risk of lung cancer compared with non-users and is linked to cancers of the mouth, oesophagus and stomach.

Find out more: https://myhealthandcancerlondon.nhs.uk/

#ItStillCounts

Bluesky / X - Suggested Post 2

Not all tobacco comes in a cigarette. Paan, naswar and other chewing tobacco products can cause serious harm and are linked to cancers of the mouth, oesophagus and pancreas.

Find out more: https://myhealthandcancerlondon.nhs.uk/

#ItStillCounts

Bluesky / X - Suggested Post 3

Shisha, cigars and chewing tobacco all contain tobacco and increase your risk of cancer. It still counts.

Find out more: https://myhealthandcancerlondon.nhs.uk/

#ItStillCounts

Instagram & Facebook



Instagram - Suggested Post 1

🚭 Not all tobacco comes in a cigarette.

Many people are aware of the risks of smoking cigarettes, but fewer realise that products such as shisha, paan, gutkha, naswar and cigars also contain tobacco and harmful chemicals that can increase the risk of cancer.

These products are linked to serious health conditions, including cancers of the:

👄 Mouth
👅 Throat
🫁 Lung
🍽️ Oesophagus
💩 Bowel

💬 If you use any form of tobacco and want to quit, find free support near you or visit your local pharmacy, doctor or dentist for more information.

Find free support near you: https://stopsmokinglondon.com/support/
🔗 Find out more: https://myhealthandcancerlondon.nhs.uk/

@rmpartnersnhs @cr_uk
#ItStillCounts #CancerAwareness #QuitTobacco

Instagram & Facebook



Instagram - Suggested Post 2

Do you use shisha, naswar, paan or chewing tobacco?

Many people don't think of these products as tobacco, so they may not mention them when asked about smoking.

🚨 But they still contain tobacco and can increase the risk of cancer.

Whether it's:

✅ Shisha
✅ Paan
✅ Gutkha
✅ Naswar
✅ Bidis
✅ Cigars
✅ Cigarettes

It still counts.

Speak to your local pharmacy team, doctor or dentist for advice and support.

Find free support near you: https://stopsmokinglondon.com/support/
🔗 Learn more: https://myhealthandcancerlondon.nhs.uk/

@rmpartnersnhs @cr_uk
#ItStillCounts #CancerAwareness #QuitTobacco

Instagram & Facebook



Instagram - Suggested Post 3

Know the risks. Not all tobacco comes in a cigarette.

Shisha, naswar, gutkha, paan, bidis and cigars can increase your risk of cancer.

Talk to your pharmacist, doctor or dentist for:

✅ Advice
✅ Support
✅ Further information

Find free support near you: https://stopsmokinglondon.com/support/

Visit: 🔗: https://myhealthandcancerlondon.nhs.uk/

@rmpartnersnhs @cr_uk

#ItStillCounts #CancerAwareness #QuitTobacco

Instagram & Facebook



Instagram - Suggested Post 4

Did you know?

🚭 Tobacco is a cancer-causing substance. Every cigarette exposes your body to harmful chemicals that can damage cells and increase your risk of cancer.

Cigarette smoke contains over 5,000 chemicals, and at least 70 cause cancer.

Quitting cigarettes is one of the best things you can do for your health.

Find free support near you: https://stopsmokinglondon.com/support/

Visit: 🔗: https://myhealthandcancerlondon.nhs.uk/

@rmpartnersnhs @cr_uk

#ItStillCounts #CancerAwareness #QuitTobacco

Further Information

Links to further information

- **Shisha, chewing tobacco, betal, paan and other tobacco:** https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/causes-of-cancer/smoking-and-cancer/shisha-chewing-tobacco-betel-paan-and-other-tobacco
- **Paan, bidi and shisha:** https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking/paan-bidi-and-shisha-risks/

RM Partners
NW & SW London Cancer Alliance

Supported by
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NHS

Find out more at www.myhealthandcancerlondon.nhs.uk

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