CANSA
Research • Educate • Support

Breaking the silence on Vulval Cancer.

Know your vulva.
Know when to ask.

#WomensHealth

www.cansa.org.za
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072 197 9305
071 867 3530

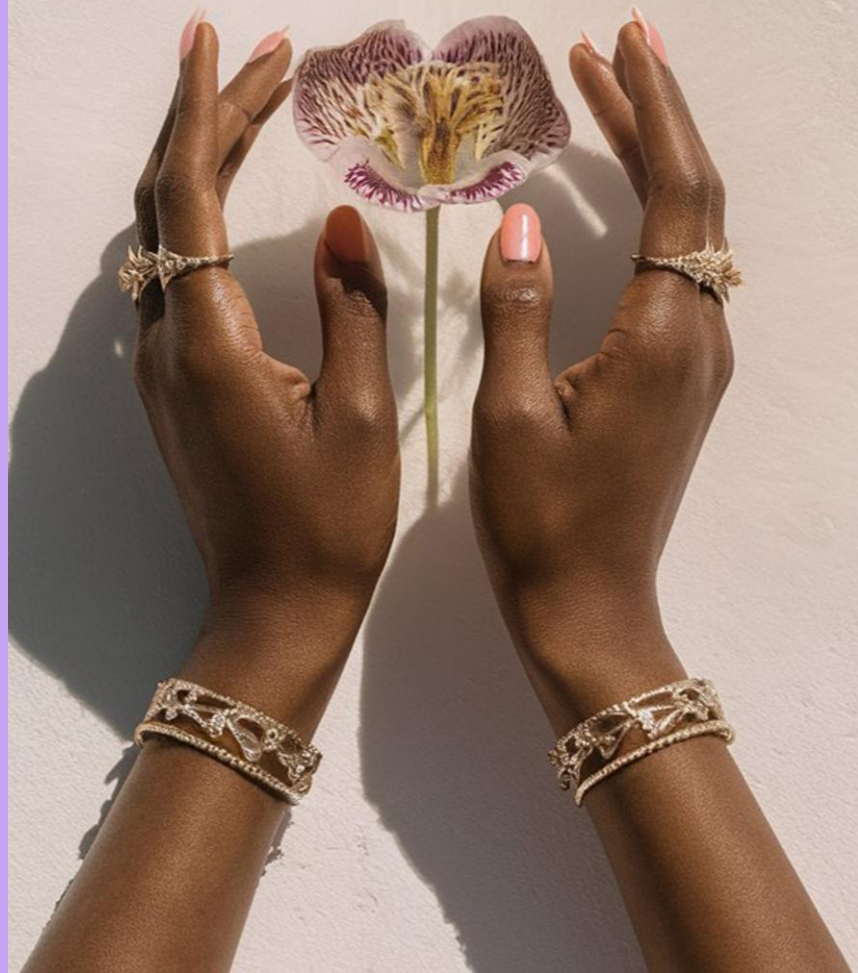
English, Afrikaans
Xhosa, Zulu,
Sotho, Siswati

August 2026

Breaking Silence on Vulval Cancer

- CANSA encourages women to pay attention to **changes** in the **external genital area**, known medically as the vulva, and to seek medical advice without shame or delay
- Women are often taught to feel embarrassed about discussing intimate health concerns. This can **delay** them from seeking help when symptoms persist or keep returning
- The vulva is different from the vagina, which is internal. Using the **correct** word helps women explain symptoms more clearly to healthcare professionals

Our message is simple:
Know what is normal for you and ask for help when something changes.



Vulval cancer (also known as vulvar cancer)

- Vulval cancer is uncommon, but South African research shows cases are **increasing** (can affect younger, middle-aged and older women)
- Incidence of vulval squamous cell carcinoma increased by ±8% per year between 2011 and 2021
- The largest increases in incidence were recorded among women aged 15 to 44 and 45 to 54
- Cancer of the vulva was among the **10 most frequently diagnosed invasive cancers** in South African women.

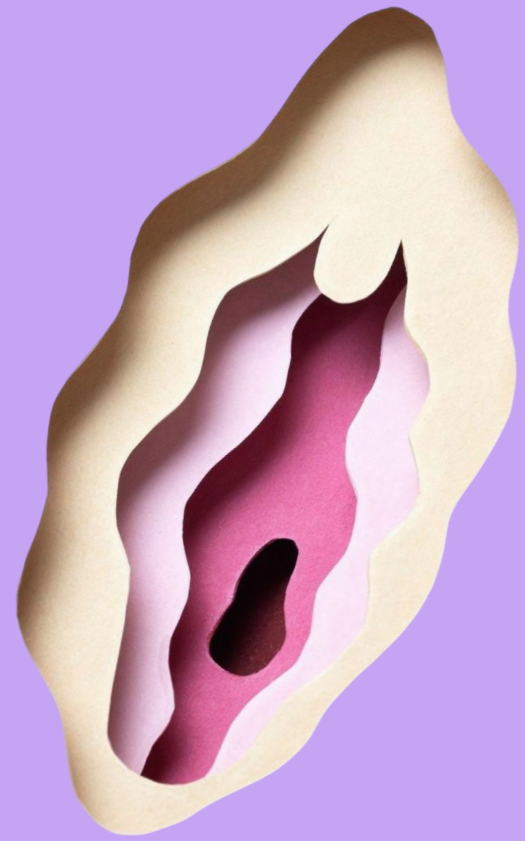
Some vulval cancers are linked to persistent infection with high-risk types of human papillomavirus (HPV).

HPV vaccination is important for cancer prevention. CANSA encourages parents and caregivers to ensure that eligible girls receive the HPV vaccine through South Africa's vaccination programme.

South African National Cancer Registry 2024

Possible warning signs

- persistent itching, burning or pain
- a change in the colour or appearance of the skin
- a lump, swelling or area of thickened skin
- a sore, ulcer or wound that does not heal
- bleeding not related to menstruation
- pain when urinating
- pain or discomfort during sex
- symptoms that return after repeated treatment



Knowing your body and speaking up early gives healthcare professionals the opportunity to examine the symptom, identify the cause and arrange further care if needed.

There is no shame in asking for help.

TOP 10 CANCERS AFFECTING WOMEN & MEN IN SOUTH AFRICA

STATS AS PER NATIONAL CANCER REGISTRY 2024

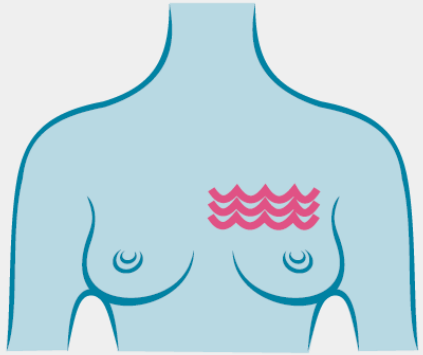
	WOMEN	MEN
1	BREAST CANCER	PROSTATE CANCER
2	CERVICAL CANCER	BASAL CELL CARCINOMA (BCC)
3	BASAL CELL CARCINOMA (BCC)	SQUAMOUS CELL CARCINOMA OF THE SKIN (SCC)
4	SQUAMOUS CELL CARCINOMA OF THE SKIN (SCC)	COLORECTAL CANCER
5	COLORECTAL CANCER	LUNG CANCER
6	UTERINE CANCER	MELANOMA (ALL FORMS)
7	MELANOMA (ALL FORMS)	NON-HODKIN LYMPHOMA
8	NON-HODGKIN LYMPHOMA	BLADDER CANCER
9	VULVAR CANCER	OESOPHAGEAL CANCER
10	LUNG CANCER	STOMACH CANCER

WOMEN MEN

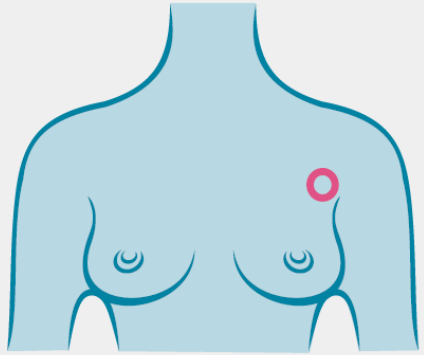
♀ 1:8 SA WOMEN LIFETIME RISK

♂ 1:7 SA MEN LIFETIME RISK

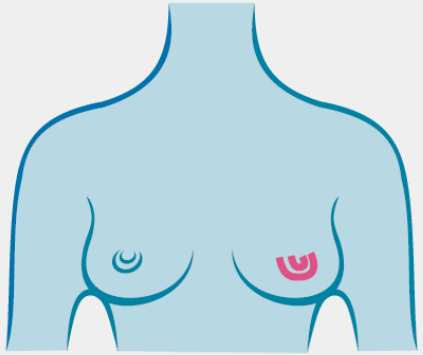
Breast Cancer – Warning Signs



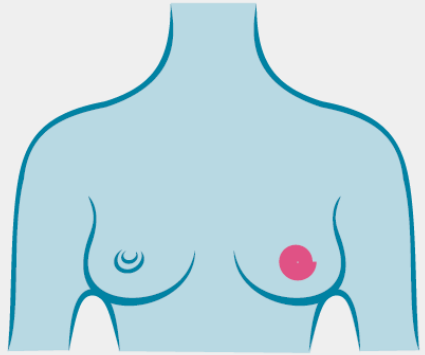
A puckering of the skin of the breast.



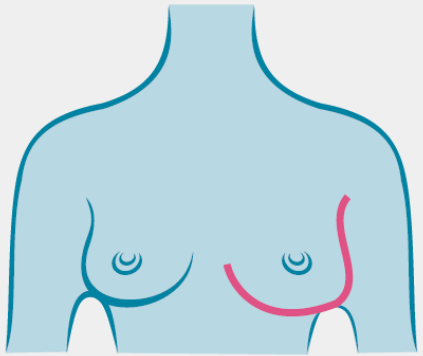
A lump in the breast or armpit.



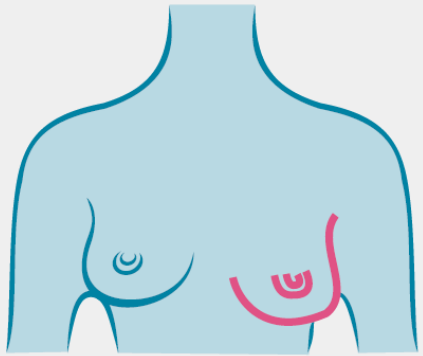
A change in the skin around the nipple or nipple discharge.



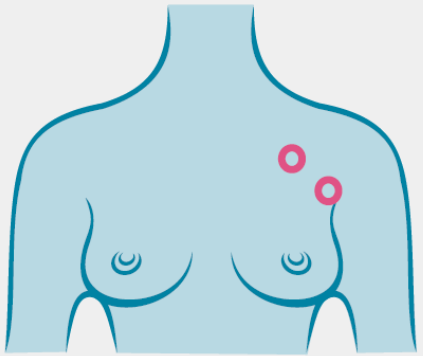
Dimpling of the nipple or nipple retraction.



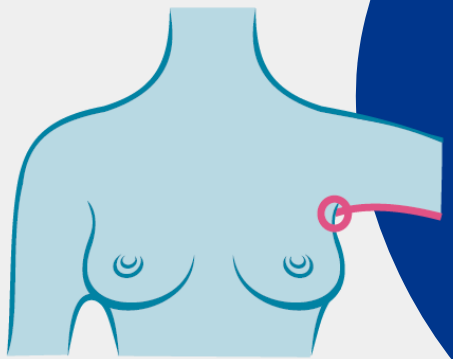
An unusual increase or shrinkage in the size of one breast or recent asymmetry of the breasts



One breast unusually lower than the other. Nipples at different levels.



An enlargement of the glands.



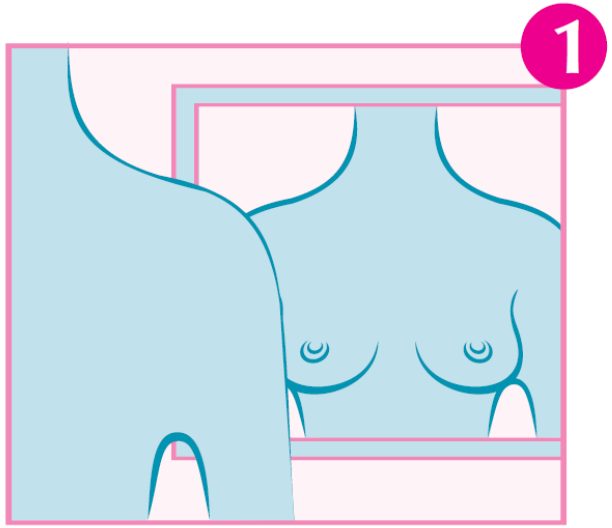
An unusual swelling in the armpit.

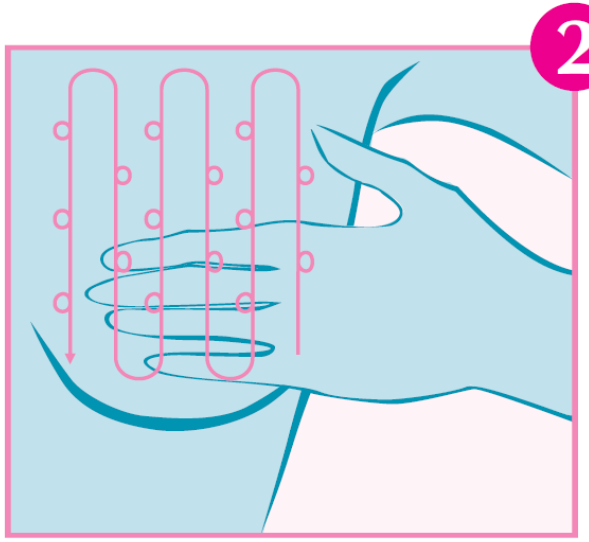
Do monthly breast self-examinations ~ Go for regular screening (clinical breast examinations)
Symptom-free women aged 40 to 54 should go for a mammogram every year
(women 55 years & older should change to every 2 years)

You have a higher risk for breast cancer if...

- You are older than 50
- You have a close family member with breast cancer
- You have a personal history of cancer and have received treatment for it
- Your breast tissue is very dense
- You have never given birth or your first confinement was after the age of 35
- You're using, or have recently used birth control pills (oral contraceptives) for many years
- You are post-menopausal and are using combination hormone replacement therapy (HRT) (combination of oestrogen and progesterone)
- You use tobacco products or have 2 or more standard alcoholic drinks per day
- Obesity

Breast Self-Examination in 3 Easy Steps



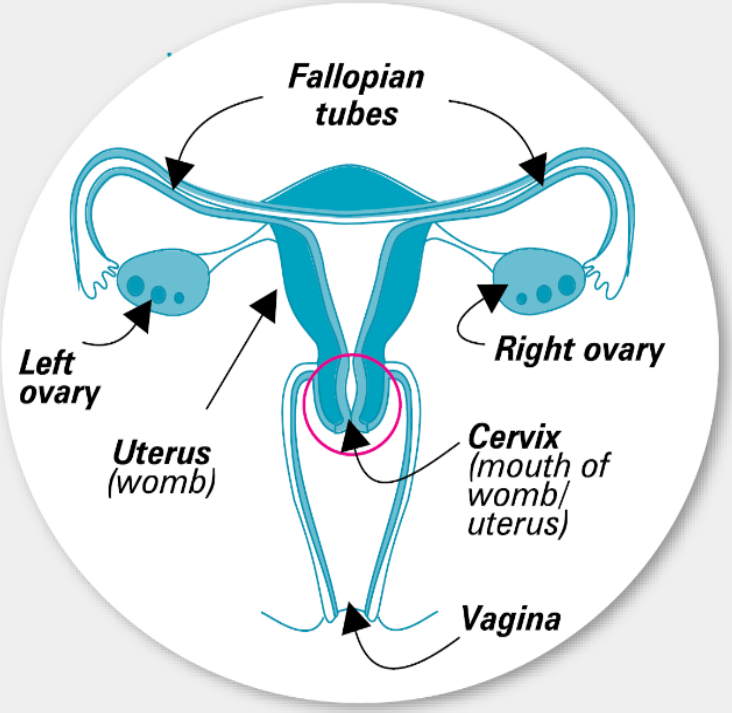


1. In the mirror - Check for any changes in the normal look and feel of your breasts, such as dimpling, size difference or nipple discharge. Inspect four ways: arms at sides; arms overhead; firmly pressing hands on hips and bending forward.
2. Lying down - Lie on your back with a pillow under your right shoulder and your right hand under your head. With the three middle fingers of your left hand make small circular motions, follow an up and down pattern over the entire breast area, under the arms and up to the shoulder bone, pressing firmly. Repeat using right hand on left breast.
3. While bathing - With your right arm raised, check your right breast with a soapy left hand and fingers flat using the method described under "Lying down". Repeat on the other side.

Watch video:
https://youtu.be/7ef2RF_9U4c

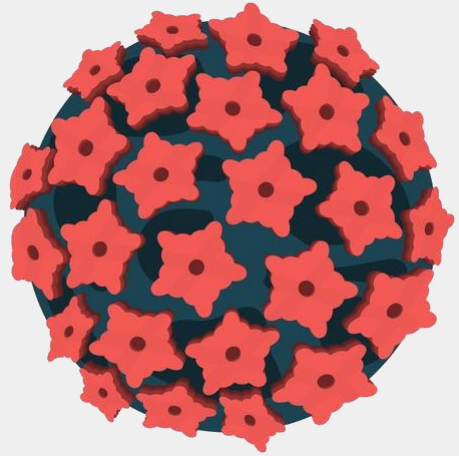
Cervical Cancer – Early Detection is Key

- Almost all cervical cancers are caused by Human Papilloma viruses (HPVs) – a common virus that is spread through skin-to-skin contact, body fluids and sexual intercourse
- Cervical cancer can be effectively treated if detected & diagnosed early
- Pap Smear = reliable screening test for the early detection of cervical cancer - a swab of cervical cells
- Women ages 18-25 who have ever been sexually active should have Pap smears every 3 years, or 2 years later after first sexual activity (whichever is later) and continue until age 70



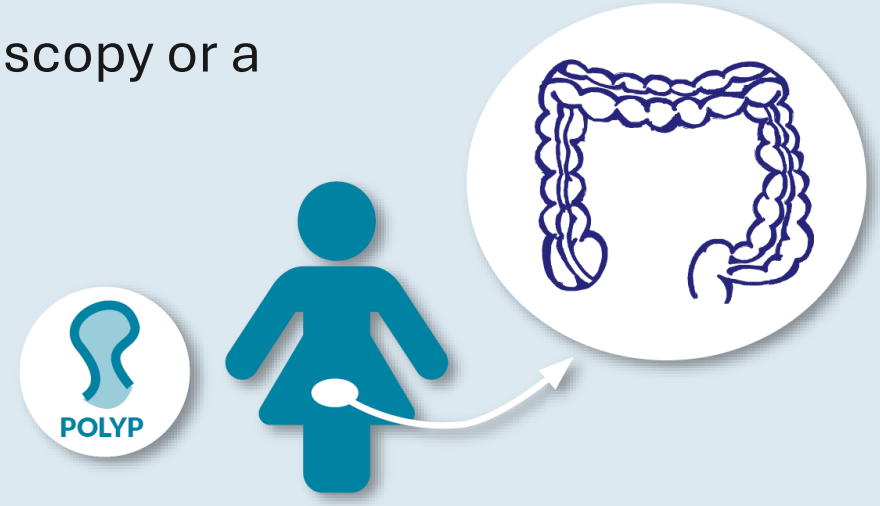
Cervical Cancer – HPV

- CANSA supports the Department of Health's HPV School Vaccination programme (read more)
- Persistent infection with HPV may lead to cervical cancer - all females 9-26 years (provided they are not sexually active) can be vaccinated
- Women making use of public sector screening services are entitled to three free Pap smears per lifetime, starting at 30 or older, with a 10-year interval between each smear
- Women who are at high risk, including those that are HIV-positive, can attend more frequently



Colorectal Cancer – Early Detection is Key

- Most colorectal cancers begin as a POLYP, a small growth of tissue that starts in the lining and grows into the centre of the colon or rectum
- Doctors can remove polyps during the colonoscopy procedure
- Go for regular colon screening tests such as a colonoscopy or a sigmoidoscopy from age 50 – every 10 years



Signs & Symptoms*

- Change in bowel habits, incl. diarrhoea/ constipation
- Rectal bleeding / blood in stools
- Persistent abdominal discomfort (cramps, gas or pain)
- A feeling that bowel doesn't empty completely
- Weakness or fatigue
- Unexplained weight loss

* Many people experience no symptoms

Colorectal Cancer – Risk Factors

LIFESTYLE FACTORS:

Lack of regular exercise

Low fruit/ vegetable intake

Low-fibre & high-fat diet

Being overweight (obesity)

Tobacco use

Alcohol use

Poor oral/ dental hygiene

GENETIC FACTORS:

Hereditary Syndromes such as Lynch Syndrome

Personal or family history of colorectal cancer or polyps

OTHER FACTORS:

Old age

Type 2 Diabetes

Inflammatory Bowel Disease

An Active Balanced Lifestyle SIGNIFICANTLY Lowers the Risk for Colorectal Cancer

Uterine Cancer

The uterus or womb is part of the female reproductive system. The endometrium is the lining of the uterus, the hollow, muscular organ in a woman's pelvis

Cancer of the uterus - also referred to as ENDOMETRIAL or UTERINE cancer is when malignant (cancer) cells form in the tissues of the endometrium

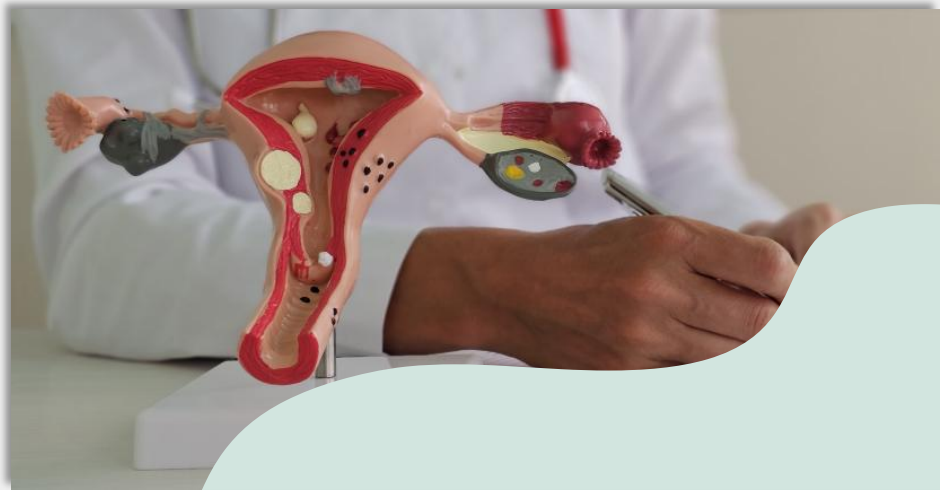
Risk Factors

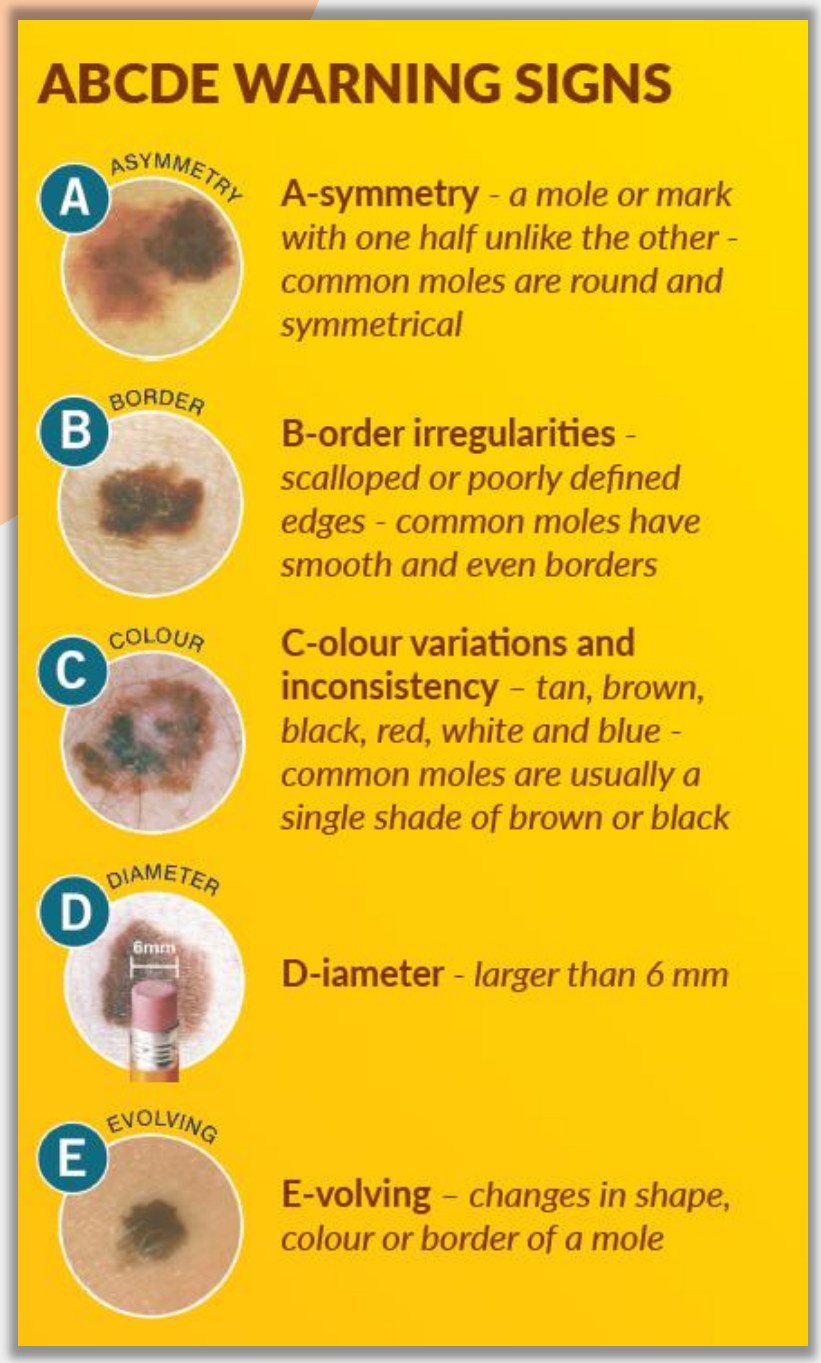
- Genetics
- Inability to fall pregnant
- Infrequent menstrual cycle or starting period before age 12
- Oestrogen replacement therapy without use of progesterone
- Diabetes

+

Symptoms

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding or discharge that is not normal for you
- Pain in pelvis or abdomen especially when passing urine or having sex
- Severe pain and persistent pelvic pressure



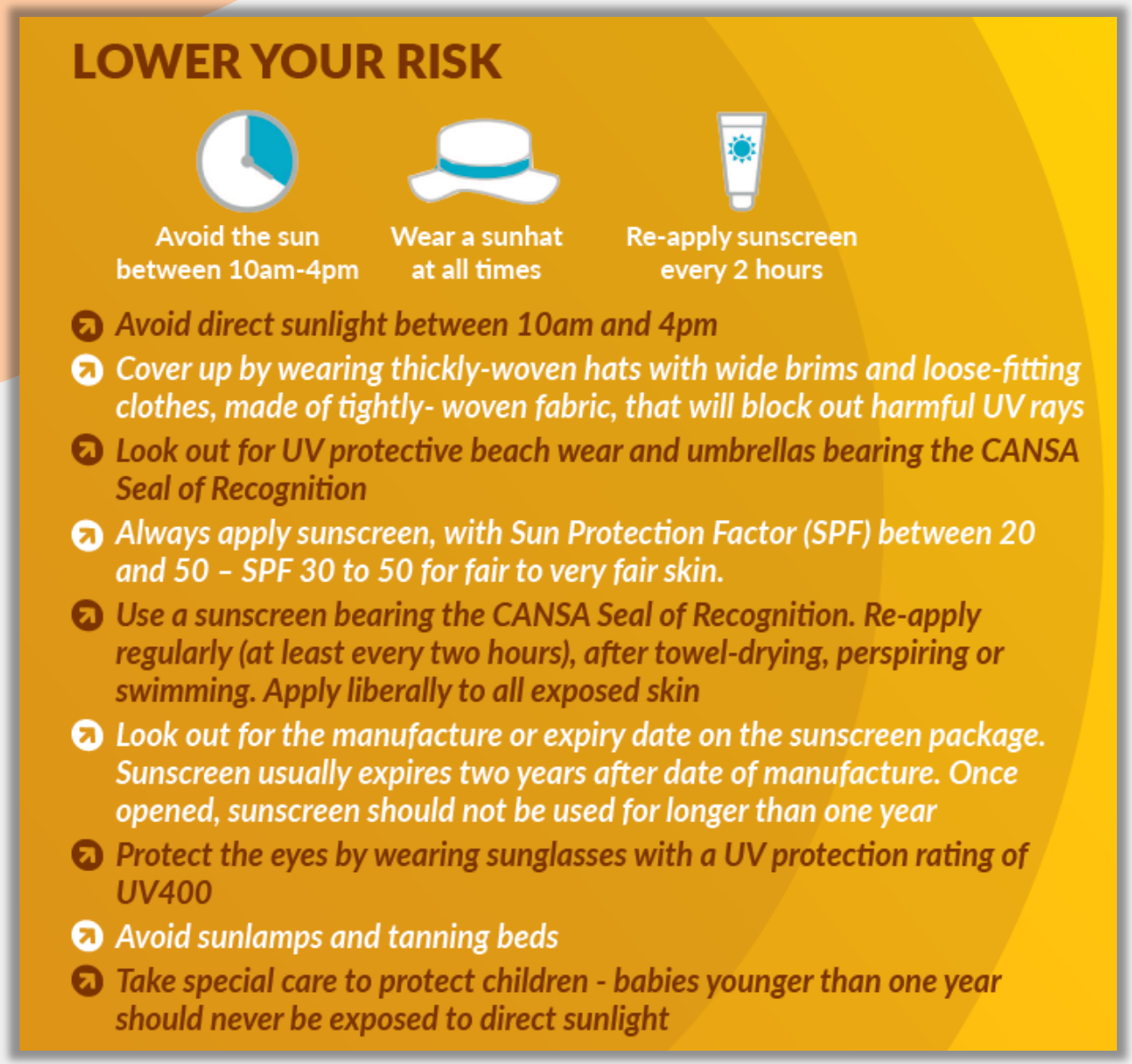


Melanoma

Screening

- Check your skin carefully every month by doing a mole check - ask a family member or friend to examine your back and the top of your head
- If you notice any of the warning signs, see a doctor or dermatologist immediately
- FotoFinder skin examinations are available at some CANSA Care Centres

Melanoma

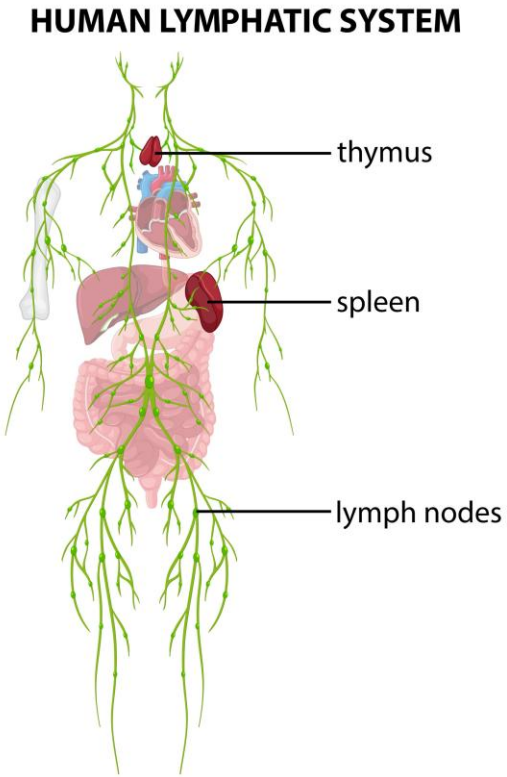


Risk factors

- Having a lighter natural skin colour
- Family or personal history of skin cancer
- Exposure to the sun through work & play
- History of sunburns early in life
- Having blue or green eyes, blonde or red hair
- Having many moles and certain types of moles
- Having a skin that burns, freckles, reddens easily, or becomes painful in the sun

Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma

...is cancer of the lymphoid tissue, which includes the lymph nodes, spleen, and other organs of the immune system.



Symptoms

- Swollen lymph nodes in neck, underarms, groin, or other areas
- Night sweats
- Itching
- Fever and chills
- Weight loss
- Abdominal pain or swelling, which may lead to loss of appetite, constipation, nausea, and vomiting
- If the cancer affects cells in the brain, the person may have a headache, concentration problems, personality changes, or seizures
- Coughing or shortness of breath if the cancer affects the thymus gland or lymph nodes in the chest

Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma

Risk Factors

- More common in older people
- More common in men
- Family history
- Patients with diseases/ conditions affecting the immune system (HIV+/AIDS and organ transplant recipients) may be at higher risk
- Autoimmune Disorders
- Overexposure to industrial and agricultural chemicals

Screening

- A doctor will perform a physical exam and check body areas with lymph nodes to feel if they are swollen
- Biopsy of suspected tissue, usually a lymph node biopsy
- Bone marrow biopsy

Screenings available to women

- Do monthly breast self-examinations (http://www.cansa.org.za/steps-how-to-do-a-breast-self-examination-bse/)
- Go for clinical breast examinations - available at CANSA Care Centres countrywide (http://www.cansa.org.za/cansa-care-centres-contact-details/)
- Go for regular Pap smears - available at CANSA Care Centres countrywide (a screening test for early diagnosis of cervical cancer)
- Faecal occult blood tests – available at some CANSA Care Centres (It is a sample of stool collected on end of an applicator to help detect small quantities of blood. Although not always an indication of colorectal cancer, positive results require a referral to a doctor)
- FotoFinder skin examination - available at some CANSA Care Centres
- Symptom-free women should go for a mammogram every year from age 40. Women 55 years & older should change to every 2 years
- Women can be screened at public hospital breast clinics if they have a referral letter from a medical professional or CANSA nurse. Alternately contact the Radiological Society of SA (RSSA) www.rssa.co.za to arrange for a mammogram.

How does CANSA help?

Our service comprises health, education, and advocacy awareness campaigns; CANSA Care Centres that offer a wide range of care and support services to those impacted by cancer - cancer screening and early detection; stoma and other clinical support, empowering home-based carers, wigs, and medical equipment hire. CANSA also has Information and Support desks at public hospitals.

CANSA nurses continue to offer free advice to patients and caregivers regarding side effects of types of cancer, treatment, nutrition, pain management, and palliative care. The Advocacy department provides a free service to patients experiencing delays in treatment or access to pain control medication or stoma supplies.

We offer a free Tele and Virtual Counselling service in most SA languages and supply patient care and support in the form of CANSA Care Homes in the main metropolitan areas for out-of-town cancer patients and CANSA TLC lodging for parents / guardians of children undergoing cancer treatment.

The national CANSA Help Desk provides online support via the toll-free line, 0800 22 66 22, email; info@cansa.org.za and multi-lingual WhatsApp lines (text only); 0721979305 for English and Afrikaans and 0718673530 for isiXhosa, isiZulu, siSwati, Sesotho and Setswana

Contact Us

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- Call us toll-free on 0800 22 66 22, or email info@cansa.org.za or WhatsApp (text only): 0721979305: English/Afrikaans & 0718673530: Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, Siswati
- Like our CANSA national Facebook page: CANSA The Cancer Association of South Africa
- If you are a Survivor, please join our Facebook group in support of cancer survivors: Champions of Hope - CANSA Survivors
- If you are a Caregiver, please join our Facebook group in support of cancer caregivers: CANSA Caring for the Carers
- Follow us on: X (formerly Twitter) @CANSA | Instagram @CancerAssociationOfSouthAfrica
  TikTok (@cancerassociationza) | Pinterest CANSA
  LinkedIn @CancerAssociationOfSouthAfrica
  WhatsApp channel https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029VbAWtQv2P59ipVaysk2Q
- View our videos on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/c/CancerAssociationofSouthAfricaCANSA

What can You do to Help?

Help CANSA expand its Awareness and Care and Support programmes, please consider donating at any of our CANSA Care Centres country-wide

or Online at http://www.cansa.org.za/personal-donation-options

or Make a Donation via SnapScan or Zapper on your smartphone:

Stay informed, subscribe to our e-newsletters:
https://cansa.org.za/subscribe-to-our-email-newsletter/

Like and Share our health awareness materials on your social media ~ it can save a life!

Disclaimer

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