FACTSHEET 1

Bladder Cancer in Women: Unique Challenges

Bladder cancer is often seen as a disease that mainly affects men. But women get bladder cancer too and they often face different challenges.

Around **1 in 4 people diagnosed with bladder cancer are women.** Women are more likely to be diagnosed later, which can affect treatment and recovery.

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Bladder cancer in women: what is different?

Bladder cancer develops when abnormal cells grow in the lining of the bladder. It can affect women of any age. Women often experience worse outcomes, not because the cancer is different, but because it is less likely to be suspected early.

Later diagnosis can mean:

- **More advanced cancer at diagnosis**
- **More complex treatment options**
- **Greater impact on daily activities and quality of life**

Symptoms: what to look out for

The most common symptom of bladder cancer is **blood in the urine**. This can be:

- **Visible (pink, red, or brown urine)**
- **Invisible and found only through a urine test**

Other symptoms may include:

- **Needing to urinate more often**
- **Sudden urgency**
- **Burning or pain when urinating**
- **Pelvic or lower back discomfort**
- **Feeling tired without a clear reason**

"The first symptom I had was blood in my urine – not just a little, but actual clots."

Angela, bladder cancer patient

Important: Blood in the urine is never normal — at any age.
If symptoms keep coming back or do not improve, please get checked and do not delay consulting a healthcare professional.

Why bladder cancer is often missed in women

In women, bladder cancer symptoms are often mistaken for other conditions, such as:

1. Urinary tract infections (UTIs)
2. Menstrual bleeding
3. Menopause-related changes
4. Gynaecological conditions

Many women are treated for these conditions first. If symptoms return, this can lead to repeated appointments before further tests are done. Some women also report that their symptoms were not taken seriously at first, especially if they were of younger age.

"I was treated for a UTI even though the test was negative. Later, I learned that all the symptoms I had were signs of bladder cancer."

Stacey, bladder cancer patient

Practical tip: when to request more tests

Trusting your body and asking questions is important.

You should ask for further investigation if:	Questions you can ask your doctor:
Unexplained or recurrent blood in the urine	Could this be bladder cancer?
Symptoms return after treatment for a UTI	Can my urine be tested for blood?
You are treated repeatedly for the same symptoms	Can I be referred to a urologist?
Something does not feel right	

Diagnosis: what usually happens

To check for bladder cancer, doctors may use:

1. Urine tests to look for blood or cancer cells
2. A camera test called cystoscopy to look inside the bladder
3. Imaging scans, if needed

Treatment: what women should know

Treatment depends on the stage and type of bladder cancer. It may include:

1. Surgery
2. Chemotherapy
3. Radiation therapy
4. Immunotherapy
2. A combination of treatments

Some women need surgery to remove the bladder. In women, this surgery may also involve removing reproductive organs and part of the vaginal wall.

Possible long-term effects

Some women experience long-term changes after treatment, such as:

- **Early menopause**
- **Loss of fertility**
- **Changes in body image**
- **Changes in sexual health or intimacy**

"After treatment, I felt a loss of identity as a woman. It affected how I saw myself and my femininity."

Claudia, bladder cancer patient

Sexual health and intimacy: practical advice

Sexual health is an important part of quality of life, but it is not always discussed.

What can help

- **Ask your healthcare team about sexual side effects**
- **Request referral to a specialist (e.g. gynaecologist, sexual health specialist)**
- **Take time: adjustment is physical and emotional**
- **Talk openly with your partner, if you have one**

Emotional and practical support

Bladder cancer can affect:

- **Mental health**
- **Relationships**
- **Confidence and self-image**
- **Work and finance**

Some women find the most difficult time is after treatment, when regular hospital visits stop.

"Cancer is a very scary word. It's okay to be scared, but you don't need to be alone"

Kayleigh, bladder cancer patient

Practical tips

- **Ask about emotional or psychological support**
- **Seek help with returning to work if needed**
- **Connect with patient organisations or peer support groups**

Support and further information

If you have questions or need information or resources related to bladder cancer, you can reach out to us at patients@worldbladdercancer.org. We are here to help guide you to available information and support resources, including women's stories shared through our *5 Women, 5 Experiences initiative.*

https://worldbladdercancer.org/bladder-cancer-article/women/

Notes

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