

The rise of health ignorance

When it comes to looking after our health, statistics reveal that many of us are ignoring the warning signs, don't know what to look out for, or aren't checking for them in the first place. For example, a YouGov survey found that in 2021 at least one in five women had not checked themselves for signs of breast cancer in the past year.

There is truth to the saying prevention is the best medicine. Catching serious illnesses early is often one of the best ways to get treatment for and/or manage the illness. However, it's clear that there are several barriers that stop people from seeking medical advice and treatment. This can lead to potentially serious consequences for health, both physical and mental, including delayed diagnosis and worse outcomes.

So, what are the reasons why people ignore their health?

Age: With age comes varying attitudes towards illnesses that can mean individuals do not seek out treatment. One study from supplement supplier Healthspan found that 24% of adults had ignored symptoms because they felt they were too young to worry about potentially serious illnesses.

For older generations, there is also a tendency to take a 'stiff upper lip' attitude towards health, which often means not seeking help. This is particularly true when it comes to mental health. Research from 2020 found that the majority of people over the age of 65 who had experienced depression and anxiety did not seek help because they saw it as something they should just 'get on with'.

Socioeconomic status: Much research has been done into health inequalities in poorer and wealthier areas in the UK, which can often be seen through mortality rates and the types of health conditions experienced.

An important aspect is how it can also impact an individual's likelihood to go to their doctor with health concerns. Worries about taking time off for appointments or being unable to work throughout treatment can contribute to this. Recent research from the Nationwide Building Society found that 43% of people would put off going to the doctors

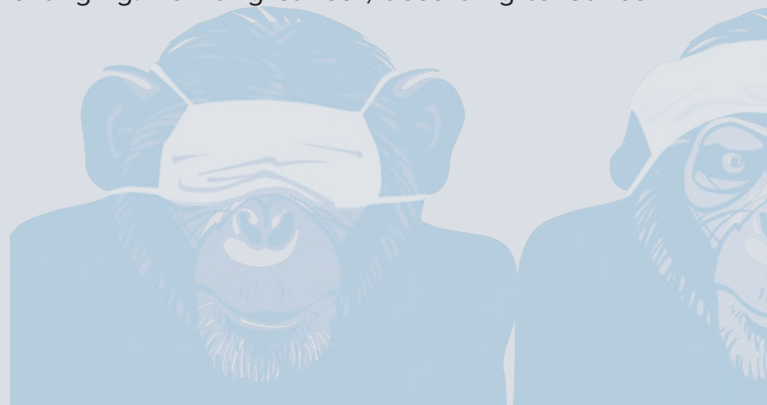
because of financial concerns, even if they were worried about a serious illness.

Feelings of shame and embarrassment: Other common reasons for avoiding or delaying treatment are feelings of shame, embarrassment, or not wanting to be a burden on healthcare providers.

One recent survey, commissioned by Pancreatic Cancer Action, found that 27% of people were too embarrassed about their symptoms to seek out treatment. The same survey also found that 37% of people were worried about wasting a doctor's time with their concerns. Research shows that as many as three in five people avoid accessing healthcare because they don't want to bother the NHS.

Fear of diagnosis: For some individuals, it's the fear of diagnosis that causes them to ignore their health and thus avoid potentially bad news. One study revealed nearly 6 in 10 people's biggest healthcare fear is getting a cancer diagnosis, which could lead to some ignoring symptoms or just not checking for them.

The fear of diagnosis can lead to denial over health concerns, but this can have terrible consequences. In the case of most cancers, the difference between detecting it early or at a later stage can be life changing. For lung cancer, according to Cancer



Research UK, 9 in 10 people will survive for at least one year when the cancer is detected at its earliest stage. But if it is not found until an advanced stage, this number falls to 2 in 10.

Gender: Gender can also be a contributing factor to delaying treatment, with women more likely to feel like they will be ignored. In the UK in 2022, 44% of women reported that they felt like their health concerns weren't being taken seriously by medical professionals. The next two main barriers to accessing healthcare were a lack of understanding of women's lives and experiences (39%) and a lack of understanding of female bodies (34%).

Another survey, conducted by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in 2021, found that 84% of women had experienced feelings of 'not being listened to' by healthcare professionals. This is a problem that urgently needs addressing, as it may cause some women to downplay their own concerns when it comes to their health.

Common assumptions can also lead to disparities for certain illnesses more commonly associated with men or women. The same survey from YouGov mentioned earlier found that nearly 70% of men had never checked themselves for signs of breast cancer at all. This is despite 80% reporting that they were aware they could develop breast cancer.

For trans and gender-diverse people, the picture can be even more worrying. Current research reveals discrimination as a reason individuals ignore their health. One study from TransActual in 2021 found that 57% of transgender people had delayed seeing or had chosen not to see their GP because of fears of transphobia or being refused treatment.

Racial barriers: A recent review led by the University of Manchester into ethnic healthcare inequalities in the UK discovered that people from ethnic minority backgrounds were also delaying treatment due to fears of experiencing racism.

Cultural stigmas can also be a contributing factor to avoiding seeking help. For example, diagnosing dementia early is hugely important for the patient to be able to plan for their future. Yet the stigma surrounding mental health is often cited as one of the main reasons that Muslim communities, for example, tend not to seek help for dementia until it reaches a crisis point.

The lack of culturally sensitive services available can be another reason for patients from ethnic backgrounds to feel locked out of healthcare.

What does this mean?

Whatever worries or fears you may be experiencing, they shouldn't come before your health. Much work is still needed to improve health services and break down the barriers that are stopping people from accessing healthcare, but help is always available. Whether you use the National Health Service or private health insurance, don't bury your head in the sand when it comes to your health.

It can be unpleasant or even scary, but the importance of seeking help if you have concerns about your health cannot be overstated. Doing so can dramatically increase survival rates or improve outcomes.

Source:

Media release