DAY 21: The big C - cancer risk, awareness and screenings

Hello Take Fivers,

Today we're focusing on cancer; prevention, early detection and support. Cancer affects so many of us - **one in two people in the UK will get cancer at some point in their lives.** While not all cancers can be prevented, there are ways we can reduce our risk. The most important take home information from us is that **early diagnosis is hugely important** for the best outcome - make sure you access **screening** (more on this below), **know your risks and stay aware of symptoms.**

It is also important to say that we often think of cancer as one disease but it's actually a term used for many different but related diseases. Some have distinctions that affect risk - for instance, Black men have double the risk (1 in 4) of getting prostate cancer than other men and certain genes such as the BRCA genes increase the risk of breast, ovarian and prostate cancer. It's a complex picture but **knowledge is power**, which is why we are sharing this information today.

Summary:

- There is evidence suggesting that diet affects cancer risk. Diet advice is: plenty of fruit, vegetables, wholegrains and fibre, alongside reducing red and processed meat and maintaining a healthy weight. **Specialist guidance** from organisations like Penny Brohn and The Christie can help people eat well and stay strong during treatment.
- Hydration doesn't change **cancer risk, but staying well hydrated is essential for anyone taking medication**, helping the body process medication safely and reducing the chance of side effects.
- Physical activity is linked to lower cancer risk, reduced recurrence and better outcomes, and even gentle movement can ease fatigue, improve mood and support recovery. Walking, stretching and light strength work all make a meaningful difference.
- **Peer support** can be valuable during cancer, offering emotional connection, practical advice and a sense of community; **local groups in Hillingdon, including Macmillan and NHS-run services** (see connect and engage below for details), provide safe spaces for people to share experiences and feel understood. Details in the connect and engage section below.
- **Knowing your cancer risks, symptoms and screening options** could save your life. Make sure you get screened (the UK currently offers bowel, breast and cervical screenings and a targeted lung screening programme is currently being set up. There is also discussion of targeted prostate cancer screening for men at high risk).

- Cancer can impact on our finances - the **Citizens Advice Hillingdon Macmillan Cancer Support Project** provides support and assistance on welfare benefits for people and families affected by a cancer diagnosis.

For more information...

Eat

There is increasing evidence to support the role of diet in cancer prevention. Cancer Research UK is a wealth of information and has a whole section on diet. Their top tips include:

- Eating plenty of **fruit, vegetables and wholegrains**
- Reducing **processed and red meat**
- Maintaining a **healthy weight**
- Choosing **high-fibre foods**
- Limiting sugary foods and drinks

Alongside risk, diet is important during cancer treatment and recovery. Penny Brohn have information on eating during treatment and The Christie NHS Foundation Trust has some great information on Eating Well - living with and beyond cancer.

Drink

So, by now we hope we all know why hydration is important for health and how to spot signs of dehydration but what's the link to cancer? Whilst hydration is not known to affect cancer risk, it is very important for anyone on medication. When taking medication, whether for cancer treatment or other conditions, staying hydrated helps the body process medicines safely and prevents them becoming too concentrated or strong in the bloodstream.

It's worth having a read of this Open Learn article on how to prevent side effects and toxicity resulting from the effect of medications on our body.

Move

Physical activity has been linked to preventing certain types of cancer, reducing the risk of certain cancers coming back and even reducing the risk of death. Research is ongoing in this area and there are many clinical trials looking at the impact of physical activity on cancers. But one thing is clear, there is a huge amount of evidence to support moving for prevention or if you have got a cancer diagnosis; research has shown it to have a positive impact on cancer-related fatigue, depression, anxiety, quality of life and physical function.

Even gentle movement, walking, stretching, light strength work, can make a meaningful difference and support recovery.

Connect and Engage

For anyone going through cancer, it can be a scary, overwhelming and draining time. Research has consistently found that peer support can help people living with cancer. Hillingdon has a range of **cancer support groups**, offering emotional support, practical advice and connection with others who understand the journey. Macmillan run a women's cancer support group, the NHS community cancer centre can provide a wealth of information on local activities and the NHS Hillingdon Hospitals website lists other organisations working in the area.

Think

Today we are focussing on knowledge - **know your risk, know what to look out for and how to access your GP if needed**. There are over 200 types of cancer so we can't cover them all but we are focussing on the most common cancers in the UK: breast, prostate, lung and bowel cancers.

Breast cancer: firstly, anyone can get breast cancer - it's much more common in women but men can get it too. Know your risk - have a look at the risk factors on Cancer Research UK's website. The NHS recommends checking your chest and breasts every month for lumps and has a guide on their website on how to check yourself. There's also a national screening programme which saves 1000s of lives every year. If you aren't sure when you last had a screening, contact your GP immediately.

Prostate cancer: prostate cancer doesn't affect people that were assigned female at birth as they don't have a prostate gland. Knowing your risk is important for prostate cancer - Prostate Cancer UK has a handy risk checker online - it takes a minute and is worth knowing. Prostate cancer often doesn't have symptoms and therefore, it's important to know your risk and talk to your GP about your risk. You can discuss a PSA (prostate specific antigen) blood test through your GP. Possible symptoms include changes in how you wee or if it becomes painful to wee, erectile dysfunction and lower back or hip pain are possible signs too. These symptoms don't mean you have prostate cancer but go to see a GP if these symptoms occur.

Lung cancer: smoking and exposure to cigarette smoke is a well known risk factor for lung cancer but there are other risk factors also including asbestos and air pollution. There is a screening programme being rolled out across the UK for people aged 55 - 74, that smoke or have a history of smoking - find out more on the NHS website. Also, know the symptoms and remember, it can happen to anyone, not just smokers:

- A persistent cough (three weeks or more)

- Feeling breathless for no reason
- Repeat chest infections or infections that don't improve with treatment
- Loss of weight and/or appetite
- Coughing up blood
- Tiredness
- Chest / shoulder pain

For more information, the Roy Castle Lung Foundation is full of resources.

Bowel cancer: again, we urge you to know your risk - for instance, having type II diabetes increases your risk which *we* didn't know. Get screened! There is a well established screening programme for bowel cancer which comes through the post every two years to everyone aged 50 - 74 that's registered to a GP. Make sure you do yours as it could save your life. Know the symptoms:

- Changes in your poo - softer, diarrhoea or constipation that is unusual for you
- Need to poo more or less often than usual
- Blood in poo - may look red or black
- Bleeding from your bottom
- Bloating
- Tiredness
- A lump in your stomach

Tip of the Day!

Screening - we cannot say it enough - **screening programmes exist because they save lives.** Make sure you get your cancer screening *every* time you are eligible.

Finances - cancer can impact our finances. The **Citizens Advice Hillingdon Macmillan Cancer Support Project** provides support and assistance on welfare benefits for people and families affected by a cancer diagnosis.

A note about smoking. Take Five to Age Well doesn't address smoking, yet smoking is the biggest preventable cause of death and ill health in the UK. Research shows it's **never too late to quit** – our lungs and circulation improve and over years recover. There are now many techniques to quit and they can be tailored to your needs – we encourage anyone who smokes to seek advice from your local Hillingdon stop smoking service. For more information, please refer to the Hillingdon Council webpage on Stop Smoking.

That's all for today, except to say a massive thank you for continuing this journey with us. With one week to go, it might be a good time to think about your action(s) and any tips you've picked up throughout the month – could they become **new habits you stick with for good?**

Best wishes,

The Take Five Team.

Reminder: This information is general guidance and if you have any concerns over your own health please speak to your medical professional.