

'IT WORRIES ME TO THINK PEOPLE ARE TOO SCARED TO SEE A GP'

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Bowel cancer is one of the UK's biggest but least talked about killers. HANNAH DAVIES speaks to one Leicestershire man about his battle to beat the disease

When doctors told Mick Mason he had bowel cancer, he was well prepared. The disease runs in his family through a faulty gene named Familial Adenomatous Polyposis (FAP), and his chances of suffering from it were so high he had already had surgery to remove his bowel.

The preventative operation came too late - he was devastated to discover that the cancer had already taken hold. That was in 1999. Chemotherapy followed, and now, five years on, Mick has the all-clear. In fact, it is now one year since he overcame the disease.

As part of Bowel Cancer Awareness Month, he is keen to highlight symptoms of the disease and urge people to seek advice if they are concerned. It is rare that bowel cancer is caused by the FAP gene, and is more commonly a disease associated with poor diet, lack of exercise and smoking.

But it's embarrassment that stops people visiting a GP. Even though Mick, 62, knew he was at risk, he still delayed going to the doctor a year after symptoms, such as blood in his stools, began.

He says: "It is worrying to think that people are too scared to go to a GP. "If someone does have symptoms, then it doesn't necessarily mean they have bowel cancer, but it's worth getting checked to be sure.

"If you cut your finger, you put a plaster on it, but if it doesn't heal, you would see a doctor, and the same should be true with cancer.

"People shouldn't leave getting treatment until it's too late."

Bosses at the national charity Beating Bowel Cancer (BBC) are also urging people to get educated about the disease, which can affect any part of the colon or rectum that forms most of the large intestine or bowel.

There are more than 35,000 cases of bowel cancer diagnosed in the UK each year - making it the second-biggest cancer killer after lung cancer. In Leicestershire it is the third most common cancer, with more than 400 people diagnosed each year.

The UK has some of the lowest survival rates in Europe - about 50 per cent of people die from the disease. This need not be the case. If caught early enough the survival rate can be 90 per cent.

Charity spokeswoman Tara MacDowe says: "People don't realise how many of us will be affected by bowel cancer but it's actually one in 18 . "There is a reluctance to talk about bottoms and bowels. We need to banish taboos associated with bowel cancer, as we've done with breast cancer.

"The sooner bowel cancer is diagnosed the higher the chance of survival - if you are concerned don't be embarrassed, get it checked out."

A recent survey revealed almost one in five bowel cancer patients waited more than six months before seeing a doctor. Lack of knowledge about the disease remains a key problem. The study also showed that 55 per cent of people could not name a symptom of bowel cancer, such as a lump in the abdomen.

Doctors advise people who have these symptoms or notice any other change in their bowel habit for more than six weeks to see their GP.

Meanwhile, Mick is now looking to the future. His sister and three children have also had tests for the FAP gene, and his daughter - who tested positive - has had her bowel removed as a preventative measure.

Mick has launched a website to raise awareness of the FAP gene. He says: "I don't say I'm cured, because I don't want to tempt fate, but I am fairly positive the cancer won't come back. "Some days, I still worry about the fact that it might return, but most of the time I look on the bright side of life, and the website means I can bring the disease to the attention of others."

* More information on bowel cancer is available through the BBC charity's symptoms hotline, on 0870 24 24 870. and at the following websites -

www.beatingbowelcancer.org

www.cancerresearchuk.org