In Europe, many women suffer from breast or cervical cancer. However, treatment is often successful if these cancers are detected early enough.

Therefore throughout 1997, the European Commission's 'Europe against Cancer Programme' has devoted its efforts and its resources to a large scale information campaign concerning these cancers.

All over Europe, women are being encouraged to talk to their doctor or other health professionals and to voluntary cancer organisations, about female cancers and especially about how they can reduce their risk of suffering from a disease which all too often profits from silence - as all too often people find it difficult to talk about it.

Each year, in collaboration with the Government and cancer organisations, the European Commission fights cancer with the help of the 'European Code against Cancer'. This year recommendations 9 - "Have a cervical smear regularly. Participate in organised screening programmes for cervical cancer" and 10 - "Check your breasts regularly. Participate in organised mammographic screening programmes if you are over 50" - are at the forefront of the campaign.

ASK YOUR DOCTOR FOR ADVICE OR CALL 0800 66 55 44

NHS Helpline
5 KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF ABOUT WOMEN'S CANCER

BREAST CANCER

Breast cancer is rare in young women but becomes increasingly common from around the age of 35 onwards. The vast majority of cases are in women aged 50 or more. Little is known about the causes of breast cancer, but the risk of developing it rises as you get older. Breast cancers which are linked to a family history of the disease are thought to account for only 5% of cases.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

You should learn to “be breast aware” from around your mid 20s onwards. You should know what your breasts are normally like and if you notice any change, report it to your GP without any delay. You should check your breasts for any changes. If you notice anything unusual, such as a lump, don’t delay. If you are 50 or over, you should attend for regular screening by mammography, when invited.

WHAT SHOULD I DO?

You are recommended to attend for mammography from the age of 50. In the UK, women aged 50 to 64 are invited every three years as part of the NHS Breast Screening Programme. Women aged 65 and over are welcome to attend, if they refer themselves.

WHAT SCREENING PROGRAMMES ARE AVAILABLE?

You should look out for anything which is not normal for you. A lump is the most commonly recognised early symptom of breast cancer, but other symptoms can include a swelling, or thickening of the skin, new inversion of a nipple, or discharge from a nipple only, and in particular from one duct only and eczema suddenly appearing around the nipple. Any change in size or shape of one breast may also need investigation.

WHAT SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR?

If you have any general concerns about breast health, you can talk to your practice nurse. If you have any particular symptoms you should see your GP. If you have received an invitation for screening, you can contact the screening unit who will give you more information about the screening process. If you are 65 or over and wish to go for breast screening, then you can contact either the screening unit directly, or your GP. For information on your local breast screening unit, phone the NHS Health Information Service (Freephone 0800 66 55 44).

WHO CAN I TALK TO?

CERVICAL CANCER

Cervical cancer is linked to the human papilloma virus, which is sexually transmitted. Women who have had more partners, or whose partner has had more partners, are at greater risk. Smoking increases the risk of developing cervical cancer and the use of barrier contraceptives can lower a woman’s risk. Since the detection and treatment of cervical abnormalities through screening programmes can prevent cervical cancer developing, women who regularly attend for smear tests are at lower risk.

WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Stopping smoking, reducing the number of sexual partners you have, and using barrier methods of contraception, are all ways to reduce your risk of cervical cancer. You should also attend for smear tests regularly in order that any early abnormality can be identified and treated before it has a chance to develop into cervical cancer. You should go to your GP if you have any unusual bleeding, such as after intercourse or between periods, since this may need to be investigated.

WHAT SCREENING PROGRAMMES ARE AVAILABLE?

You are recommended to go for a smear test, or a Pap test, every three to five years. This can identify abnormalities in the cervix which, if left, might develop into cervical cancer. In the United Kingdom, women aged 20 and 64 are invited at least every five years.

WHAT SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR?

Even if you attend regularly for smear tests you should be aware of the early signs and symptoms of cervical cancer since the smear test is not 100% sensitive. The major symptom which you should look out for is unusual bleeding. In particular, this would be bleeding after intercourse or bleeding between periods. Any incident of bleeding should be reported to your GP who may wish to refer you to a gynaecologist for investigation.

WHO CAN I TALK TO?

If you are due for a smear test, you should contact the nurse or doctor at your family surgery. Smear tests are often available in well woman and family planning clinics. If you have some symptoms about which you are worried, you should see your GP without delay.