

## PRESS RELEASE

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### PUBLIC DON'T REALISE SCREENING CAN HELP PREVENT CANCER

THE PUBLIC don't fully understand the purpose of all the national cancer screening programmes, with few people aware that some screening aims to prevent the disease, according to research presented at the National Cancer Research Institute (NCRI) Cancer Conference in Liverpool today (Wednesday).

There are three national cancer screening programmes in the UK: breast, bowel and cervical. Mammography for breast cancer and the faecal occult blood test (FOBT) for bowel cancer are aimed at detecting cancer early. Bowel Scope, a new addition to the English bowel cancer screening programme, and cervical screening are primarily aimed at preventing the disease.

Researchers at the Cancer Research UK Health Behaviour Research Centre, based at University College London (UCL), carried out a survey with nearly 1,500 adults in, or close to, the screening age range (50-70 years old) across Great Britain. Participants were asked whether they thought the primary aim of each of the screening programmes was early detection or prevention of the disease\*.

The results of the survey showed that:

There was no sign that people were aware of the differences between the screening programmes; only a fifth (19 per cent) of women knew the main aim of cervical screening was to prevent the disease; 70 per cent of men and women incorrectly thought that flexible sigmoidoscopy was primarily for early detection.

Dr Jo Waller, study author based at the Cancer Research UK Health Behaviour Research Centre, said: "The decision to take part in the screening programmes should be an individual choice. But in order to make a well-informed decision you need a good understanding of what's involved, the balance of benefits and harms, and also why you're being asked to take part in the first place.

"We're not sure why there's uncertainty about what these tests are for. So it's crucial we work with the public to make sure we're providing the best possible information and understand the common questions and misconceptions they might have."

Professor Charles Swanton, chair of the 2015 NCRI Cancer Conference, said: "These results show that we need to get better at helping people to understand what cancer screening is for. Some of the problem may be that most of the public discourse has been around breast screening, which is designed to pick up cancers early.

"Along with the misconceptions over the primary focus of each of the programmes, we also know that many people are unaware that screening is aimed at healthy people who don't have symptoms. It's essential that we do more research to find the sources of these misconceptions, which should help us to improve the public's understanding in the future."

Harpal Kumar, Cancer Research UK's chief executive, said: "We often talk about the importance of spotting cancer early because treatment is more effective and that gives patients the best chances of beating the disease. But, in many cases, cancer screening can also prevent the disease.

"The three national screening programmes have already saved thousands of lives since they were introduced. But we also know that screening carries risks as well as the benefits. It's absolutely essential that people are able to make an informed choice about taking part in screening and that means understanding what these programmes are designed to do."

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## ENDS

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### Notes to Editors:

Abstract details: <http://abstracts.ncri.org.uk/abstract/public-understanding-of-the-purpose-of-cancer-screening-a-population-based-survey-2/>

\*The interviews asked about the primary aims of cervical screening, breast screening and bowel screening, which involves the faecal occult blood test (FOBT) and a one-off test called Bowel Scope.

### About the NCRI

The National Cancer Research Institute (NCRI) was established in 2001. It is a UK-wide partnership between cancer research funders which promotes collaboration in the field. Its member organisations work together to maximise the value and benefits of cancer research for patients and the public.

NCRI members are: Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council; Bloodwise (formerly Leukaemia & Lymphoma Research); Breast Cancer Now; Cancer Research UK; Children with Cancer UK, Department of Health; Economic and Social Research Council; Macmillan Cancer Support; Marie Curie; Medical Research Council; Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Public Health Agency (Research & Development Department); Prostate Cancer UK; Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation; Scottish Government Health Directorates (Chief Scientist Office); Tenovus Cancer Care; The Wellcome Trust; Welsh Assembly Government (Health and Care Research Wales); and Worldwide Cancer Research (formerly AICR).

For more information visit [www.ncri.org.uk](http://www.ncri.org.uk)

### About the NCRI Cancer Conference

The NCRI Cancer Conference is the UK's major forum for showcasing the best British and international cancer research.

- The Conference offers unique opportunities for networking and sharing knowledge by bringing together world-leading experts from all cancer research disciplines.
- The NCRI Cancer Conference is taking place from 1–4 November 2015 at the BT Convention Centre in Liverpool.
- For more information visit [conference.ncri.org.uk](http://conference.ncri.org.uk)

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