NFWI

Resolution Shortlist Briefing Notes

Love Your Vulva - Self checking is your best defence against vulval cancer

Love Your Vulva - Self checking is your best defence against vulval cancer

Self-checking your vulva is important in ensuring the earlier detection of vulval cancer and to enhance survival chances. We call upon WI members to work together to raise awareness of the importance of self-checking and seeking medical advice as early as possible, and, to help highlight this rare cancer to GPs to promote prompt referrals to medical specialists when needed.

Proposer's position

The proposer's intention is for the NFWI to campaign for greater awareness, education, and early detection of vulval cancer. Through the promotion of self-checking, breaking taboos around vulval health, empowering women to seek help from their GP, and improving awareness amongst medical professionals, the proposer aims to improve early detection and survival rates of vulval cancer.

The scale of the problem

The vulva is the external female genital organs. The vulva includes the inner and outer lips of the vagina, the clitoris, the opening of the vagina and its glands.

According to the Eve Appeal, approximately 1400 new cases of vulval cancer are diagnosed in the UK each year, 80% of which are women over the age of 60 years, but diagnosis is increasing in younger age groups.

Symptoms of vulval cancer can include a lump or swelling on the vulva, bleeding or a blood stained discharge that is not related to periods, a mole on the vulva that changes shape or colour, a persistent vulval itch, burning and soreness or pain in the vulva, and changes to the skin of the vulva such as thickened, raised, red, white or dark patches.

Macmillan Cancer Support notes that the most common type of vulval cancer is squamous cell carcinoma, making up to 90% of vulval cancer prognoses. It usually starts with pre-cancerous changes to the outer layer of the skin cells of the vulva and can take many years to develop.

Similarly to many gynaecological cancers, the earlier vulval cancer is diagnosed, the easier it is to treat. Cancer Research UK states that the survival rate for five years or more at Stage 1 is around 80%, whereas at Stage 4, around 40% of women will survive

for one year or more after diagnosis. Treatments for vulval cancer include surgery, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy.

Societal stigma, embarrassment, and shame around genitalia acts as a barrier for women to self-check or visit their GP if they suspect an issue. This has led to gynaecological health issues such as vulval cancer to be hidden, ignored and dismissed, delaying referrals, diagnoses, and appropriate healthcare.

The Eve Appeal notes that historical gender bias in healthcare has led to women's symptoms and testimonies being overlooked in the present day, including the delay of referrals and diagnoses of gynaecological cancers.

The current situation

It is suspected that most women are unaware that they should be regularly checking their vulvas. Research by The Eve Appeal found that 4 in 5 women have never checked their vulva and less than 1 in 3 people have heard of vulval cancer.

Organisations such as The Eve Appeal have publicly available tools to assist women in self-checking their vulvas, including tips, a monthly text reminder service, and illustrations of symptoms to look for.

Vulval cancer is not given the same level of policy attention in the UK as more common cancers such as breast, cervical, prostate, or lung cancer. Because of vulval cancer's rarity, it attracts less political focus, funding, and research investment compared to cancers with higher incidences and mortality. Vulval cancer falls under the broader category of rare cancers, which policymakers acknowledge need more research and better clinical trial access, as shown by the 2024 Rare Cancers Bill. The Bill make provision to incentivise research and investment into the treatment of rare types of cancers, and is currently going through its final reading through the House of Lords. Since the Bill was proposed, the government launched the England Rare Diseases Action Plan (2025), which includes amendments to the UK's clinical trial regulations aimed at supporting rare disease research. The Wales Rare Diseases Action Plan also exists to deliver on the UK Rare Diseases Framework.

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists is calling on the Government to update the Women's Health Strategy for England, published in 2022 under the previous government, to commit to increasing public awareness of the symptoms of gynaecological cancers and to invest in a national awareness campaign. The Government has noted that it will take forward the Strategy as part of its 10 Year Health Plan published in July 2025.

In 2023, the Senedd Health and Social Care Committee published a report ‘Unheard: Women's journey through gynaecological cancer’. One of the recommendations in the report calls on the Welsh Government to ‘work with Public Health Wales, community leaders and organisations to develop and implement a series of campaigns to raise awareness about the symptoms of gynaecological cancer’. Within the report, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and Royal College of GPs note the need to increase education and awareness in primary care.

The Women’s Health Plan for Wales, published in December 2024, does not prioritise awareness raising of gynaecological cancers such as vulval cancer.

The Women's Health Research Wales Centre of Excellence was launched in April 2025 and is focused on improving women’s health. One of the thematic areas for research will be stigmatised and rare conditions. In addition the Welsh Government has provided £750,000 towards other women’s health research projects.

Due to the rarity of vulval cancer, very few organisations focus on vulval cancer in their campaigning.

Points to consider:

- The WI has a long history of campaigning for increasing awareness around gynaecological cancers such as cervical and ovarian cancer. This campaign would support previous revolutions and contribute to the NFWI’s gynaecological health campaigning legacy through breaking taboos and improving public knowledge.
- The resolution is specific, accounting for less than 1% of all new cancer cases in females in the UK (2017-2019) (Cancer Research UK). This could restrict the level of impact the resolution could make.
- Would there be a sufficient level of actions that WIs could take at the local level to campaign on this issue beyond raising awareness?
- The UK Rare Diseases Framework aims to help patients get a final diagnosis faster, increase awareness of rare cancers among healthcare professionals, and improve access to coordinated, specialist care. This framework’s existence reduces the scope for political campaigning under this resolution. Although the current framework comes to an end in 2026, a new framework or policy is likely to replace it.

How could the WI work on this issue if it was passed?

A full campaign would be developed by the NFWI if the resolution is passed, taking into account developments since then. To help inform your discussions, here are some ways the WI could consider working on the issue.

At regional and local levels, WI members could raise awareness of vulval cancer within their WIs and wider communities and encourage people to self-check their vulvas. Members could also raise awareness about sources of further information and support available. .

Nationally, the NFWI could develop partnerships with expert organisations such as the Eve Appeal, Cancer Research UK, the British Society for the Study of Vulval Disease and the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV to support national awareness-raising initiatives.

Further information

NHS

Vulval cancer

Cancer Research

Vulval cancer

The Eve Appeal

Information and advice on vulval cancer

Macmillan Cancer Support

Information and advice on vulval cancer

Video Content

What is vulval cancer