

'My GPs said it was asthma – but it was leukaemia'

Do you know the four most common symptoms of leukaemia?

September marks Blood Cancer Awareness Month – and two leading charities have joined forces to launch a brand-new campaign which they hope will get more people talking about the disease.

Leukaemia UK and Leukaemia Care have this month launched their #SpotLeukaemia ad campaign, which aims to help people spot the signs of blood cancer.

This comes after findings from recently-published research found that people living in the East of England were unable to identify all four of the most widely-reported symptoms.

A public survey conducted by the two charities revealed that over two-fifths (41pc) of respondents from the East of England couldn't name any of the four most widely-reported symptoms of the disease – which are fatigue, bruising, unusual bleeding, and repeated infections.

Only 45pc of respondents were not able to recognise fatigue as a symptom – which is often the most likely to be identified by those diagnosed later in life with leukaemia.

Other symptoms include fever or night sweats, bone or joint pain, and swollen lymph nodes.

Leukaemia, which kills around 5,000 people a year in the UK, is the fifth most common cancer and third deadliest – and overall survival for the disease stands at just over 50pc.

A common misconception is that leukaemia only affects children – but this is not the case. While it is true that is the most common type of childhood cancer, leukaemia cases rise sharply after the age of 55 – and 38pc of all new cases occur in the over 75s. Statistics from the study also found that only 11pc of over-55s thought that they had the greatest

risk of leukaemia.

The Spot Leukaemia campaign particularly wants to increase awareness among those who are over 65, as this age group is the most likely to be diagnosed with the disease.

Chief executive of Leukaemia UK Fiona Hazell said: "It's extremely worrying that less than 1pc of Brits are able to identify the most common symptoms of leukaemia, when 28 people are diagnosed each day in the UK. People underestimate their risk by thinking that leukaemia is a childhood disease. In reality, both incidence and mortality rates rise sharply after the age of 55. Raising awareness in this age group is critical in order to treat it early and effectively; and ultimately to improve survival rates overall."

One woman in the region, however, managed to spot the signs when she was in her late-60s – and has since made a successful recovery.

Ann Fox, now 78, was diagnosed with chronic myeloid leukaemia (CML) at the age of 66 after visiting her GP after

experiencing a handful of common symptoms back in November 2010.

"My symptoms included chest infections, mouth thrush, bruising, trouble with my breathing, and night sweats," she recalls.

"My GPs at the time insisted it was asthma, but they eventually gave me the blood test I asked for. The results came back and at 8.30am that morning I was told all normal.

"But at 11.30am, my GP phoned and told me I was seriously ill. He said he didn't know what happened to the blood test but I had to go straight to hospital, where I was admitted and began treatment. I was terrified,



thinking I was going to die."

It was found Ann had a white cell count of 550. A normal white cell blood count is anywhere between 4,500 and 11,000.

Shortly after being admitted to Ipswich Hospital, Ana began treatment and started a course of hydroxyurea. "At one of my early OP appointments, I was asked if I would take part in a trial to which I agreed and started on Dasatinib," she adds.

Ann later took part in a five-year trial treatment, which compared two drugs – Imatinib

and Dasatinib – for helping treat CML.

"Over the years, I have changed my leukaemia medication quite a few times due to complications. The only real thing that's changed over the years is complications with four of the medications ending, with me now on Nilotinib. I was taken into hospital in January with pneumonia which gave me slight heart failure.

"The biggest impact on my CML journey is that it has taken away my self-confidence," she says.

"Much later, I saw an article in

the local newspaper about a young mother of three children newly-diagnosed with CML. I read that she was holding a coffee morning so my husband and I went along and introduced myself. I wanted her to know she wasn't alone, and I didn't want her to feel like I did when diagnosed. We exchanged telephone numbers so she could phone me if needed, and we still keep in touch to this day."

Eventually, Ana found another CML support group – and says she hasn't looked back since.

"They are a constant source of



Inset above, the four most widely-reported symptoms of leukaemia are fatigue, bruising, unusual bleeding and repeated infections

Main, Ana's white blood cell count was 550 - a normal white blood cell count is anywhere between 4,500 and 11,000

Inset far left, chronic myeloid leukaemia (CML) survivor Ann Fox, alongside her husband and dog

Pictures: GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCKPHOTO/ ANN FOX

support and help and, besides my dear husband, are always by my side. I think my journey with CML would have been so much harder otherwise.

"I attended a patient group meeting at Hammersmith, where I intend to go more often. A great place to get correct and valuable information and that is where I met my first, lovely leukaemia Care nurse.

"I have never felt discriminated against because of my age, and if anything, I personally think if there is a good age to have CML it

is my age. I have had a good life and the privilege of seeing some of my grandchildren go to university. My heart goes out to my fellow CML-ers who are young and have to bring up young children. I pray, in time, a cure will be found."

If you have any of the above symptoms, contact your GP and ask for a blood test.

To find out more about the signs of leukaemia and to watch the campaign video, visit spotleukaemia.org.uk

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