

# Early awareness matters: Breast cancer education for young people

October 2026



A report and project co-produced with  
Healthwatch Dorset youth volunteers

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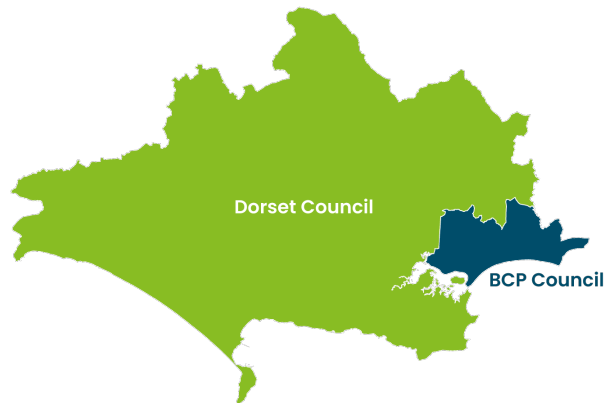
# About us

*Healthwatch Dorset is your health and social care champion.*

We listen to your experiences of using local health and care services and hear about the issues that really matter to you. We are independent and impartial, and your feedback is confidential. We can also help you find reliable and trustworthy information and advice to help you to get the care and support you need.

As an independent statutory body, we have with the power to make sure that NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to your feedback and use it to improve standards of care. This report is an example of how your views are shared.

Healthwatch Dorset is part of a network of over 150 local Healthwatch across the country. We cover the geographical area of Dorset, which includes the unitary authority areas of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) and Dorset.



## Background

Healthwatch Dorset's ethos of working with volunteers is based on recognising and valuing their individual skills, experiences, and interests. It is believed the best way to harness this potential is by truly listening to their ideas. Previous work on the Young Listeners project highlighted the power of meaningful engagement and showed how to keep young volunteers actively involved through co-creation and shared decision-making. By focusing on what volunteers want from their experience, we were able to foster a sense of ownership, provide leadership opportunities and create outcomes that benefit everyone involved. This learning continues to shape our current and future work.

For this project, Healthwatch Dorset recruited, trained and supported a group of young volunteers from Year 12, at Bournemouth School for Girls. We followed our ethos of youth empowerment to co-produce this project with students. We provided training in role and responsibilities, survey design, safeguarding, active listening and data analysis. We were led by the students to provide a true and authentic learning experience for them. They decided on the project focus, method, administration, analysis and evaluation and wrote this report. The group carried out extensive research in deciding on the project focus and for the development of their questions. Nine young people volunteered at least 270 hours for the project. We thank them for their insight and dedication and thank the school for their support.

*This report is written by youth volunteers and produced by Healthwatch Dorset.*



## What we wanted to find out

The aim of the project was to gain an insight into the education of breast cancer awareness within local Secondary Schools, focusing on misconceptions or gaps within student knowledge. Our plan was to discover how educated and aware people in our age bracket were about breast cancer.

We wanted to identify where students felt safest sourcing health advice and explore areas for improvement for breast cancer awareness education for boys and girls in Years 7-13\*.

## What we did

When exploring ideas about the project focus, one key topic that all members agreed on was breast cancer. At Bournemouth School for Girls, students had received only one lesson on breast cancer between Years 7 and 12, which highlighted a wider lack of education and awareness surrounding women's health. Attending an all-girls school makes this gap even more significant, as these are issues that directly affect women and could have an impact on their future lives.

Because of this, we felt it was important to create a project that not only informs but also empowers students with knowledge that should be accessible, normalised, and openly discussed. However, as breast cancer can affect all genders, we extended the quiz to male students as it was important to hear their perspectives and understand their awareness.

### Quiz

Having decided on our topic, we thought it was most suitable to design a quiz to make it accessible for a variety of age ranges to partake in, while also providing an educational tool, where participants got instant feedback and information about a right or wrong answer.

It was essential, for us, when creating the quiz, that each question covered a range of topics which would ultimately allow us to identify gaps in knowledge about breast cancer within the youth community and also educate. With the limited time that students had in the morning, before the school day began, we carefully thought about the type of questions we wanted to use and how we would share it and get responses to the quiz. Multiple choice was the ideal format to use as it was quick to undertake and included answers which couldn't be guessed, so participants would have to rely on real knowledge instead of chance. See [Appendices: General quiz questions \(p.9\)](#). We made sure that we distributed the quiz throughout each year group to highlight any year group gaps.

### Poster

Following our action plan, our next step was for one of the youth volunteers to design a poster (*right*), which included a QR code, to allow both students and staff to access the quiz.



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\* Department of Education guidance explains the need for pupils to be taught about not only the benefits of healthy eating and keeping fit, important factors to preventing cancer, but also the prevention of health problems and self-examination.

# Key findings

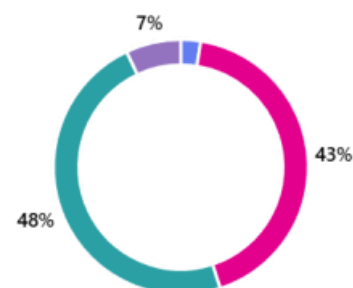
## Common misconceptions

- Half of the **200 respondents** thought adults aged 35–50 years were most likely to develop breast cancer. *[Correct answer: aged 50+]*
- 35% could not identify a correct symptom.
- 17% thought wearing a bra to sleep can increase risk of developing breast cancer. *[False]:*
- 38% thought there were no lifestyle factors that increase the risk of developing breast cancer. *[Correct answer: Being overweight and taking the contraceptive pill]*
- 46% of respondents thought that one quarter of all new cancer cases were diagnosed as breast cancer. *[Correct answer: 15% of all cases]*
- 57% of people did not identify correctly where breast cancer can develop in the body.
- 7% thought that men could not develop breast cancer. *[Correct answer: <1% of males do]*

3. What percentage of breast cancer cases are male? (0 point)

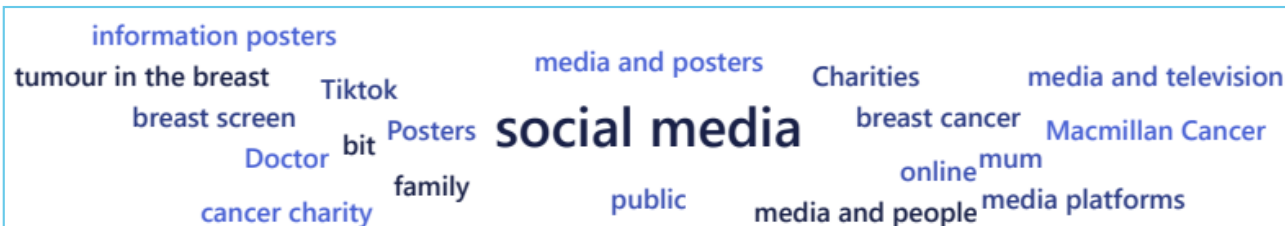
48% of respondents answered this question correctly.

|                                          |      |
|------------------------------------------|------|
| 50%                                      | 5    |
| 10%                                      | 85   |
| <1%                                      | 96 ✓ |
| None as men cannot develop breast cancer | 14   |



## Education of breast cancer for young people

- Nearly 60% of students younger than Year 12 said they had never received any breast cancer awareness education.
- Less than 40% of Year 12 and Year 13 surveyed received education on breast cancer within school.
- 65% of males who answered had not received information from school.  
*"My girlfriend has told me some stuff. I have heard what Bournemouth School for Girls talk about. She has been doing some research into breast cancer and I now further understand the dangers risks and prevention techniques to spotting [it] early on."*
- Macmillan and Tickled Pink were the two most well-known breast cancer charities and 40% had heard of the Coppa Feel charity. However, 48% of Year 7 could not name any breast cancer charity.
- 24% of respondents said they had learned about breast cancer through social media, especially TikTok.



- 85% would go to family or friends for support if needed.
- 38% of students felt most comfortable getting information from healthcare services, 37% felt most comfortable with school, and 25% felt most comfortable going online.
- Several respondents highlighted that seeing posters in public conveniences had raised their awareness, for example, *"On the Asda toilet doors."*

## What people told us

### Breast cancer awareness education

Many people reported a lack of breast cancer awareness education, as well as insufficient follow-up support. We can see this through the overall lack of accuracy when answering the survey questions. There is also a significant difference between male and female responses, with the percentage of correct male responses substantially lower than female responses for almost every question. See [Appendices: Correct answers by gender \(p.11\)](#).

One participant shared that he would *"feel most comfortable receiving information about breast cancer from ChatGPT."*



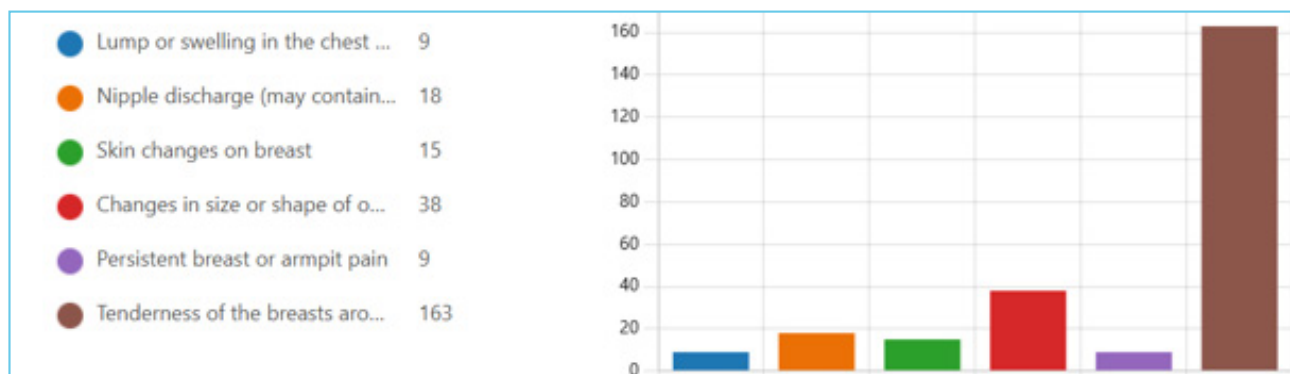
Without accurate education, we are concerned that young people may be left to make inaccurate assumptions.

### Information around breast cancer is unclear/misinterpreted

Only 19% of respondents were aware of the age in which people are most likely to develop breast cancer. This could be due to misinformation being spread on different platforms or misunderstanding information given to the public. A reason this may have happened also could be due to the lack of breadth when looking and teaching breast cancer awareness to students. For example, only looking at one type of cancer or being shown different age categories of getting breast cancer and not others. To improve this gap in knowledge, it could be beneficial to have refreshers at least once a year for students to remind them of the signs and raises awareness of the importance of being aware of their bodies and the changes that can occur that could potentially be due to breast cancer.

### Symptoms of breast cancer are not fully understood by young people

When asked to select which option was **not** a breast cancer symptom, 65% answered correctly, identifying menstrual related tenderness as not a cancer symptom showing a good baseline understanding around symptoms.



However, a noticeable minority still selected genuine cancer symptoms as not being indicators, such as skin changes, nipple discharge, and persistent pain which were incorrectly disregarded by some students. The dismissal of important warning signs can lead to later diagnosis, especially in young people where breast cancer is not common but can be more aggressive, putting them at risk.

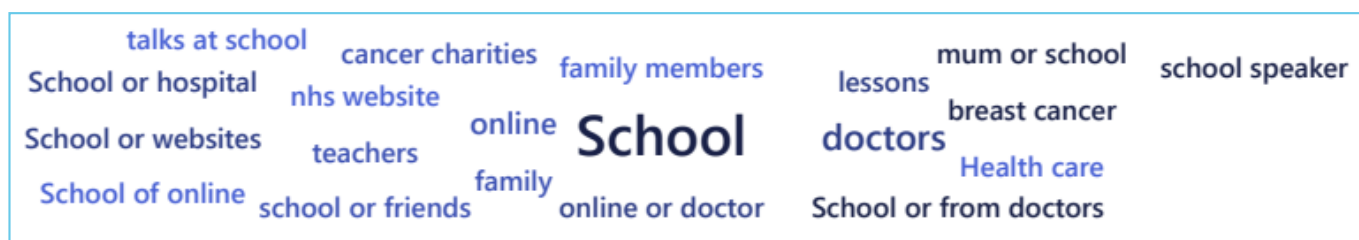


## Lifestyle factors

A significant number of young people thought there were no lifestyle factors that increase the risk of developing breast cancer. This is interesting, as it is well advertised that factors such as smoking increase the risk of cancer. However, the majority of respondents were able to recognise that being overweight does increase risk, as well taking the contraceptive pill. There were also a significant number of people who incorrectly thought that wearing a bra while sleeping increased the risk, so there may be incorrect myths or ideas regarding this that should be more publicly discouraged. The lack of knowledge surrounding risk factors can cause anxiety around health and makes it harder for young people to help protect themselves from risk factors.

## Where young people feel comfortable receiving support

When asked where young people would feel comfortable receiving support, the vast majority of responses said 'school', with other variations of educational and healthcare providers also mentioned, demonstrating a high trust in these institutions. A notable quarter would prefer to receive their education from social media.



# Recommendations

## 1. Improved NHS digital content for young people

Use social media to share engaging and medically correct information about breast cancer awareness, as many young people access health information through these platforms. Involve young people in the design of digital content to ensure it is engaging, relevant, and accessible. This content should also direct users to NHS webpages containing links to relevant charities and support services.

## 2. Breast cancer education for all schools

Governing bodies should work with the NHS and relevant charities to introduce consistent breast cancer education sessions in secondary schools for all genders. These sessions should be medically accurate and delivered regularly, as young people identified schools as a trusted source of health information. Standardised education would ensure all students receive reliable information and help reduce misconceptions surrounding breast cancer. On a wider scale, students should also be taught how to find and use trusted sources of health information.

### 3. Breast cancer awareness materials in public and healthcare settings

NHS services, schools and community organisations should display accessible breast cancer information through posters and leaflets in spaces commonly used by young people. As posters were identified as an important source of awareness, expanding their use in locations such as GP surgeries, schools, gyms and shopping centres could improve access to reliable information. Young people could also be involved in creating awareness materials, for example, through competitions during Breast Cancer Awareness Month to increase engagement.

## Next steps

### How will we use the findings to improve services

In Autumn 2026, the student youth group will give a presentation to their school, where the largest number of responses originated from, to help clear any misconceptions and signpost students to clear and accurate resources. They will also write a newsletter to send to parents and guardians of students, to ensure conversations can also be held at home.

## Stakeholder comment

**Jane Winter, Director for Cancer Nursing & AHPs, Wessex Cancer Alliance**

“It’s important for us to have insight about how younger people understand the signs and symptoms of breast cancer. It’s even better that they are working together to create greater awareness of this for themselves. We would like to help and support this work to make sure they get the best outcomes from their engagement.”

## Acknowledgements

This project was co-produced with Healthwatch Dorset by Maya Filep, Christianah Ogunwole, Grace Rawlison, Ella Tsang, Grace Childerhouse, Ka-yee Yeung, Izzy Hallam, Lisa Stewart and Amy Andrews over the course of one academic year. We also thank Abigail Coe, Deputy Head of sixth form at Bournemouth School for Girls, and Nikita Lee, Careers Coordinator, for their continued liaison and support. As well as all of those who played the quiz, special thanks go to Maya Filep for coordinating the group, Ka-yee Yeung for designing the poster, and Grace Rawlison for organising the research.



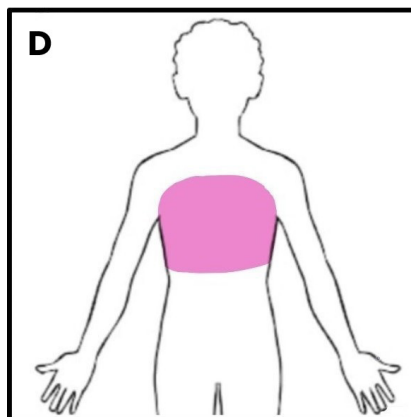
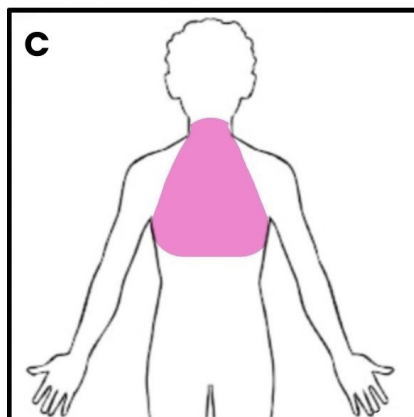
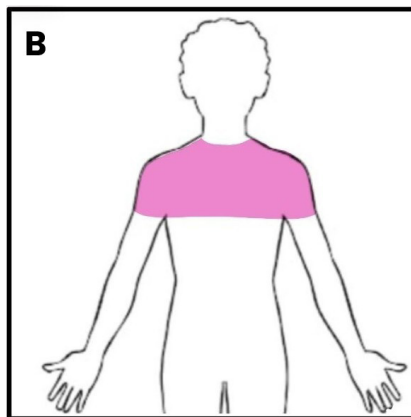
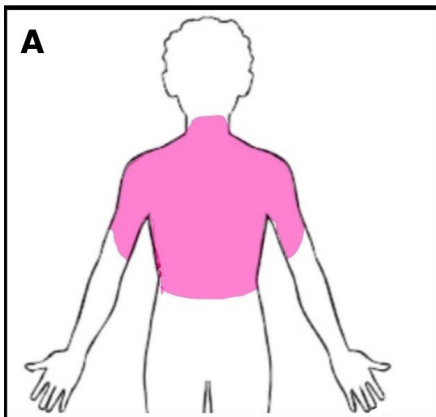
# Appendices

## General quiz questions

### Breast Cancer Awareness

Thank you for taking part in this quiz. Its purpose is to understand how much people know about breast cancer and where they are currently sourcing their information. Your responses will help us identify gaps, improve education, and develop more effective and accessible resources.

1. At what age are people most likely to develop breast cancer?
  - 0–20 years old
  - 20–30 years old
  - 35–50 years old
  - 50+ years
2. Out of all new cancer cases in a year, how many are diagnosed as breast cancer?
  - 5%
  - 15%
  - 25%
  - 50%
3. What percentage of breast cancer cases are male?
  - 50%
  - 10%
  - <1%
  - None as men cannot develop breast cancer
4. Where can breast cancer develop in the body?



5. Breast cancer can be more aggressive in younger women.
- True
  - False
6. Which of these symptoms is NOT an indication of breast cancer?
- Lump or swelling in the chest or armpit
  - Nipple discharge (may contain blood)
  - Skin changes on breast
  - Changes in size or shape of one or both breasts
  - Persistent breast or armpit pain
  - Tenderness of the breasts around the menstrual cycle
7. Which of these lifestyle factors may increase the risk of breast cancer? (*Tick all that apply*)
- Being overweight
  - Taking the contraceptive pill
  - Wearing a bra whilst sleeping
  - There are no lifestyle factors that increases the risk the risk of breast cancer
8. Which of the following breast cancer charities have you heard of?
- Teenage Cancer Trust
  - Coppa Feel
  - Breast Cancer Now
  - None
  - Other
9. If other, please tell us which charities you have heard of.

## Information

Tell us a bit about yourself. All information is confidential and will be anonymised.

10. What gender do you identify as?
- Male
  - Female
  - Other
  - Prefer not to say
11. How would you describe your ethnicity?
- Asian or Asian British (Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, any other Asian background)
  - Black or Black British (African, Caribbean, any other Black background)
  - Mixed (White & Asian, White & Black African, White and Black Caribbean, any other Mixed background)
  - White (British, Irish, any other White background)
  - Other Ethnic Group
  - I do not wish to disclose this information
12. If you are in education, which school do you go to?
- Bournemouth School for Girls
  - Bournemouth School
  - Highcliffe School
  - Other

13. If you selected other, please tell us where you are studying.
14. Are you a student or staff?
15. If in education, which year are you in?
- Year 7
  - Year 8
  - Year 9
  - Year 10
  - Year 11
  - Year 12
  - Year 13
16. Have you received any breast cancer education within school? *(If so, please provide details)*
17. If you have you found any information outside of school about breast cancer, please tell us where it was, including online/social media.
18. Where would you feel most comfortable getting support or information from about breast cancer?
19. Who would you go to for support if you needed it?
- Family
  - Friends
  - Teachers
  - Trusted adult
  - Health care provider
  - Online
  - Other
20. If other, please tell us where.

## Correct quiz answers by gender

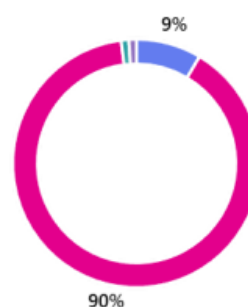
| % of questions correctly answered                                                       | Female = 180 | Male = 17 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|-----------|
| 1. What age are people most likely to develop breast cancer?<br><b>Answer: 50+</b>      | 84.0%        | 41.0%     |
| 2. How many new cancer cases are diagnosed as breast cancer?<br><b>Answer: 15%</b>      | 68.5%        | 59.0%     |
| 3. What percentage of new breast cancer cases annual are male?<br><b>Answer: &lt;1%</b> | 49.7%        | 35.3%     |
| 4. Where can breast cancer develop in the body?<br><b>Answer: A</b>                     | 45.3%        | 23.5%     |
| 5. Breast cancer can be more aggressive in younger women?<br><b>Answer: True</b>        | 67.4%        | 82.4%     |

| % of questions correctly answered                                                                                                                | Female = 180 | Male = 17 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|-----------|
| 6. Which of these symptoms is NOT an indication of breast cancer?<br><i>Answer. Tenderness of the breast around the menstrual cycle</i>          | 67.4%        | 41.2%     |
| 7. Which of these lifestyle factors may increase the risk of breast cancer?<br><i>Answer. Being overweight and taking the contraceptive pill</i> | 16.6%        | 5.9%      |

## Demographics

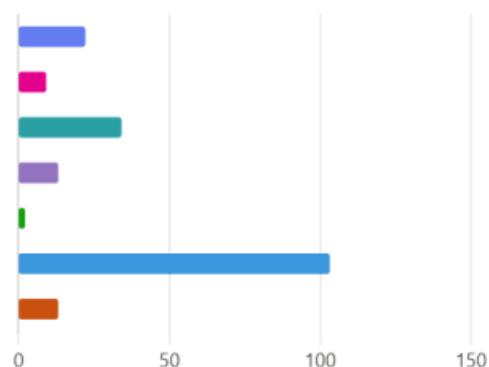
10. What gender do you identify as? (0 point)

|                   |     |
|-------------------|-----|
| Male              | 17  |
| Female            | 179 |
| Other             | 2   |
| Prefer not to say | 2   |



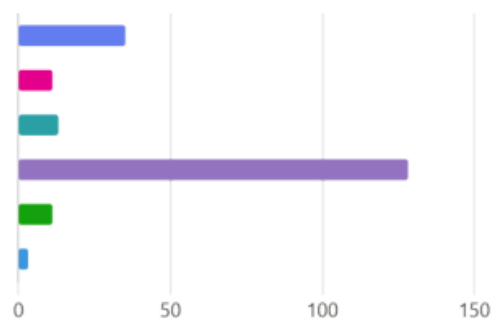
15. If in education, which year are you in? (0 point)

|         |     |
|---------|-----|
| Year 7  | 22  |
| Year 8  | 9   |
| Year 9  | 34  |
| Year 10 | 13  |
| Year 11 | 2   |
| Year 12 | 103 |
| Year 13 | 13  |



11. How would you describe your ethnicity? (0 point)

|                                                                                             |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Asian or Asian British (Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, any other Asian background)         | 35  |
| Black or Black British (African, Caribbean, any other Black background)                     | 11  |
| Mixed (White & Asian, White & Black African, White and Black Caribbean, any other Mixed...) | 13  |
| White (British, Irish, any other White background)                                          | 128 |
| Other Ethnic Group                                                                          | 11  |
| I do not wish to disclose this information                                                  | 3   |





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