

NICaN Primary Care Bulletin

Welcome from Dr Siobhan Keenan, NICaN Macmillan Primary Care Director

I am delighted to welcome you to the first edition of the NI Cancer Network (NICaN) Primary Care Bulletin.

I am a GP partner at Clanrye Medical Practice in Newry. After nearly 20 years in general practice in Northern Ireland, alongside experience in hospice care, I have developed a strong interest in cancer and palliative care. Since joining NICaN as Primary Care Director in September 2025, I have had the privilege of working with a dedicated team committed to improving cancer care across Northern Ireland.



Cancer incidence continues to rise, placing increasing demand on health services. General practice plays a vital role in early recognition, promoting screening uptake and timely referrals; actions that can significantly improve patient outcomes and survival.

We recognise the significant pressures facing primary care. At the same time, rising referral rates and ongoing waiting time challenges highlight the importance of appropriate referral and effective pathways.

This bulletin will provide updates on guidelines and pathways, educational opportunities, and raise awareness of available resources to support you in practice. NICaN is committed to working both *for* and *with* you in primary care and we welcome your feedback and ideas for improvement. (See last page to find our contact details).

This resource is intended to be brief and friendly, and this extended issue provides an introduction to the bulletin and our work.

Thank you for your ongoing dedication to improving cancer care for your patients.

Quick access to NICaN Primary Care Guidance

Latest guidelines here: [Northern Ireland Cancer Network | EOLAS](#)

NICaN primary care referral guidelines are now also available on the EOLAS app. The app also provides access to the latest NICaN Acute Oncology Clinical Guidelines and Immunotherapy Toxicity Guidelines. The app offers a quick, convenient way to access up-to-date guidance and educational materials at the point of care.

To get started scan the QR code to download the app and search under 'spaces' for NICaN.



NICaN Guidance - latest updates

Several aspects of the NICaN suspect cancer guidance for primary care are currently under review including dermatology, haematology and gynaecology. Further updates will be shared in future editions.

In January 2026, we released an updated version of the *Primary Care Guidance for Patients within 6 Weeks of Systemic Anti-Cancer Treatment* (SACT). This guidance supports the assessment and management of patients who may present with treatment-related complications. It should be considered when assessing unwell patients with recent SACT, particularly where sepsis or treatment related toxicity is a concern.

Access the guidance here: [Primary Care Guidance for Patients within 6 weeks of SACT](#)

Key updates include:

- Management of common complications of systemic anti-cancer treatment.
- Up-to-date contact details for local cancer treatment units and helplines.

Improving breast assessment waiting times: regional update

The regional breast cancer waiting list was introduced in May 2025 to reduce variation in assessment waiting times across Northern Ireland. Since then, increased core capacity across all Trusts, alongside the addition of extra clinics, led to improved waiting times. Average waiting times have reduced from the highest of **12 weeks in September 2025 to approximately 5 weeks as of 22 June 2026**. While wait times can fluctuate, they have remained below 6 weeks for the past 8 weeks.

This progress reflects a continued focus on improving timely access to assessment and diagnosis for patients. Work is ongoing to further reduce waiting times and ensure equitable access to services across the region.

Primary care - Cancer and palliative care virtual lunchtime education sessions



These one-hour lunchtime sessions developed and delivered in partnership with Belfast Trust and Macmillan Primary Care facilitators. They cover key topics in cancer and palliative care and are relevant to any health care professional working in primary care. Sessions include case-based learning and discussion of questions submitted by GPs.

These sessions are consistently evaluated very positively by attendees, reflecting their practical relevance and value to everyday clinical practice, while offering a flexible way to stay up to date with minimal time commitment.

Recordings of previous sessions are available on the NICaN website at [Primary Care Resources and Education page](#). Please join the mailing list to receive password details or email nican.office@hscni.net.



Recent sessions include:

- Bereavement Services – June 2026
- Lung Cancer Red Flag Guidelines – April 2026
- SACT Complications in Primary Care – March 2026
- Less Commonly Used Medications in Primary Care – January 2026

Helping patients access palliative medicines in the community

The Community Pharmacy Palliative Care Network helps ensure that patients receiving palliative and end-of-life care, along with their families and carers, can access essential medicines and expert advice in a timely way.

Participating pharmacies are located across Northern Ireland and are accessible during normal opening hours. Patients and carers should continue to use their usual pharmacy where possible.

To support access to this service:

- Scan the QR code below to view a list of participating network pharmacies
- Access the current palliative medicines stock list

This resource can help quickly identify pharmacies with the key medicines, reducing delay and supporting timely symptom control in the community.



**Community Pharmacy
Palliative Care Network**



Helping patients access earlier imaging



To support earlier diagnosis and reduce time from referral and investigation, patients may be offered CT or MRI appointments at sites outside their local hospital or Trust. Additional regional capacity is currently available in:

- SHSCT (CT and MRI at South Tyrone)
- NHSCT (CT at Whiteabbey and MRI at Causeway) specifically for cancer pathways.

Radiology teams report that a number of these appointments are declined, often due to reluctance to travel. This can lead to avoidable delays in diagnosis for those requiring urgent investigation.

Your support at the point of referral is crucial. When discussing a red-flag referral, it may be helpful to:

- Emphasise the urgency of investigation
- Explain that appointments may be offered at alternative locations
- Reinforce that the appointment offered is the earliest available

Helping patients understand that accepting these appointments can avoid delays and support earlier diagnosis may increase attendance and improve outcomes.

By reinforcing this message, primary care can play a key role in ensuring patients access timely diagnostic imaging when it is most needed.

CRUK & Macmillan Community of Practice for GPs

**MACMILLAN
CANCER SUPPORT**

Cancer Research UK (CRUK) and Macmillan support a UK-wide Community of Practice for GPs interested in improving cancer outcomes. Through monthly webinars, members can access evidence-based updates, expert guidance and peer support tailored to primary care. Recorded sessions, resources, e-learning modules and upcoming webinars are also available.

To find out more or join, please visit:

<https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/community-of-practice>



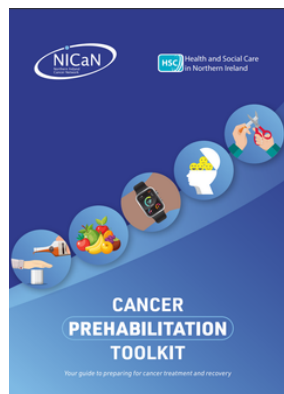
Prehabilitation Toolkit for patients awaiting cancer treatment

Prehabilitation (“prehab”) supports patients to prepare for cancer treatment by optimising their physical health, nutrition and mental wellbeing. It focuses on three key areas:

- **Physical activity:** building fitness and strength through regular exercise
- **Nutrition & weight management:** supporting healthy eating and weight
- **Mental wellbeing:** managing stress and maintaining a positive outlook.

The Prehabilitation Toolkit is a simple, patient-friendly resource designed to help individuals take practical steps before treatment begins. It provides clear guidance, short videos and signposts to local support, helping patients to feel stronger, cope better with treatment and recover more quickly.

Co-designed with patients and healthcare professionals across Northern Ireland, the toolkit aims to give patients confidence, support and a sense of control at a challenging time.



GPs are encouraged to signpost suitable patients to this resource early in the pathway. [Click here for the : Prehabilitation Toolkit](#)

Resources for your Patients: the Advanced Cancer Toolkit

The Advanced Cancer Toolkit is now available on the NICA website. The toolkit is designed to support people living with advanced cancer from diagnosis onwards, with a focus on maintaining quality of life and living as well as possible. The toolkit may also be helpful for family members, friends, and carers.

Content has been developed collaboratively by specialist healthcare professionals and people with lived experience and includes practical, expert-led information across oncology and palliative care.

Patients can work through the content at their own pace, with topics including:

- Physical & emotional wellbeing
- Hope and spirituality
- Planning ahead, practical and financial support and more...



To access the toolkit or to view the recorded information session, please visit:

[Advanced Cancer Toolkit | Northern Ireland Cancer Network](#)

To keep up to date with NICA primary care developments



To stay up to date with cancer developments relevant to in primary care, including upcoming guideline updates and education sessions scan the QR code below to join our mailing list. You will also receive the password to access previous teaching resources.

We value your input

We welcome your feedback, ideas and suggestions for future topics.

Tell us what would support your practice at Nican.office@hscni.net

