

Study highlights need for improvements in lung cancer diagnosis

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One in three lung cancer patients die within 90 days of diagnosis, research has found , highlighting the need to diagnose patients earlier and develop more effective treatments.

The researchers also found that patients who died early saw their GP slightly more frequently in the months shortly before their diagnosis than those who survived longer.

The study published in the journal *Thorax* , used data from The Health Improvement Network (THIN), which contains the anonymous health records of millions of primary care patients across the UK.

It analysed 20,142 cases of lung cancer recorded in the UK by nearly 450 general practices over the last 13 years.

The findings demonstrate that [lung cancer patients](#) do consult their GP in the time leading up to diagnosis, so there may be chances to diagnose cancer earlier.

Respiratory physician Dr Emma O'Dowd who carried out the research at Nottingham University, said family doctors needed more help in recognising patients at a high risk of lung cancer.

"If we can diagnose patients at an earlier stage hopefully they can get curable treatment rather than palliative treatment, which is what most patients are getting at the moment.

The findings also highlighted other risk factors that increase the risk of dying early from lung cancer, including being male, increasing age, socioeconomic deprivation and living in a rural community.

It also showed that, although people who had never smoked were much less likely to be diagnosed with lung cancer in the first place, those that did were more likely to die early than smokers who'd given up, but who went on to develop the disease.

"This could be for a number of reasons, potentially including higher awareness of lung cancer symptoms in ex-smokers, or biological differences between lung cancers caused by smoking and those not linked to smoking," said Matthew Wickenden, Cancer Research UK's early diagnosis manager.

Wickenden said the study also highlighted the tragic impact of lung cancer.

"Many thousands of people a year are dying just months after being diagnosed with the disease. Improving the outlook for patients with lung cancer is a priority for us, and research into more effective ways to diagnose and treat the disease will be key.

"Unfortunately, too many patients with lung cancer are diagnosed when their disease has already spread, meaning that potentially curative surgery is not an option. But we know that some areas of the country do better at diagnosing more cases earlier, which shows that more can be done."

However, he cautioned that the picture had likely improved in recent years.

"This study looked at lung cancers diagnosed over the last 13 years. In

recent years, the importance of diagnosing cancer earlier has received more attention. This includes encouraging patients with unusual or persistent changes, such as a cough that's lasted for three or more weeks, to see their GP, but also ensuring that GPs have the information and support they need to help spot cancer earlier.

"It's vital that these initiatives continue so that lung cancer patients have the best chance of getting the best treatment and surviving their disease."

Over two thirds of patients with lung cancer are diagnosed when their disease has already spread, meaning that potentially curative surgery is not an option.

On average GPs are likely to see just one [lung cancer](#) case per year, despite seeing thousands of people with potential cancer symptoms.

More information: O'Dowd, et al. (2014). "What characteristics of primary care and patients are associated with early death in patients with lung cancer in the UK?" *Thorax* DOI: [10.1136/thoraxjnl-2014-205692](https://doi.org/10.1136/thoraxjnl-2014-205692)

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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