

# Cancer patients diagnosed more quickly

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(Medical Xpress)—The time taken to diagnose some of the more common cancers – from the point when a patient first reports a possible symptom to their general practitioner (GP) – fell in adults by an average of five days in just under a decade, according to research\* published in the *British Journal of Cancer*, today (Wednesday 5 February 2015).

Researchers based at the Universities of Bangor, Exeter and Durham found that the average time it took to be diagnosed for a range of common cancers combined fell from 125 days in 2001-2002 to 120 days in 2007-2008.

And for kidney, head and neck, and bladder cancers, more than two weeks were shaved off the time between first reporting a possible symptom and receiving a diagnosis.

This improvement may be thanks to the introduction of National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Guidelines for Urgent Referral of Suspected Cancer, published in 2005. These guidelines give GPs advice about symptoms which might indicate [cancer](#) and mean the patient should be urgently referred for further testing.

The researchers looked at the GP records of more than 20,000 people over 40 in England who were diagnosed with one of 15 types of common cancers in the two periods, having re-reported possible symptoms to their GP in the year before their diagnosis.

They also found that patients whose symptoms were prioritised by the

2005 guidelines took less time to be diagnosed, and breast and testicular cancers were diagnosed in the shortest time – on average around two months between first reported symptom and diagnosis.

But there is still plenty of room for improvement. For 10 per cent of myeloma, lung or [gastric cancer](#) patients it took over 10 months to be diagnosed, even in the more recent 2007-2008 group.

Professor Richard Neal, professor of primary care medicine at Bangor University and the lead study author, said: "Our study shows that there was a small but significant improvement overall in diagnosis times for many cancers between 2001-2002 and 2007-2008. And this is likely, at least in part, to be as a result of the introduction of the 2005 NICE urgent referral guidelines."

Professor Greg Rubin, study author from Durham University and clinical lead for cancer for the Royal College of GPs and Cancer Research UK partnership, said: "Diagnosing cancers early can make a real difference to survival. We know that patients' chances of beating the disease are better when the disease is caught early as treatments are more effective before the cancer begins to grow or spread."

Sara Hiom, director of early diagnosis at Cancer Research UK, said: "It's good to see small improvements like this, but it's also clear that too many cancer patients are still waiting too long to have their cancer diagnosed - and we don't think that's good enough. That's why Cancer Research UK is working hard to raise awareness of early diagnosis through research and activities to help give patients the best chance of beating their cancer – by having it diagnosed at an earlier stage.

"This study shows it's possible to make a difference to the speed of diagnosis for some cancers through influencing policy and changing the way that potential cancer symptoms are dealt with."

**More information:** Neal, R et al. Comparison of cancer diagnostic intervals before and after implementation of NICE guidelines: analysis of data from the UK General Practice Research Database (2014) *British Journal of Cancer*. [DOI: 10.1038/bjc.2013.791](https://doi.org/10.1038/bjc.2013.791)

Provided by Bangor University

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