

People putting their lives at risk by dismissing cancer symptoms

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People could be putting their lives at risk by dismissing potential warning signs of cancer as less serious symptoms, according to a Cancer Research UK-funded study* published in *PLOS ONE* today.

More than half (53 per cent) of 1,700** people who completed a health questionnaire said they had experienced at least one red-flag cancer 'alarm' symptom during the previous three months***. But only two per cent of them thought that cancer was a possible cause.

Researchers sent the questionnaire listing 17 [symptoms](#)**** - including 10 widely-publicised potential cancer warning signs, such as an unexplained cough, bleeding, and a persistent change in bowel or bladder habits - to people, aged 50 and over, registered with three London general practices.

Cancer was not mentioned, but they were asked which of the symptoms they had experienced, what they thought caused them, if they were concerned that symptoms were serious and whether they had consulted their GP.

The results showed that people rarely attributed potential signs of cancer to the disease, putting them down to other reasons instead, such as age, infection, arthritis, piles and cysts.

Dr Katriina Whitaker, senior research fellow at University College London and lead study author, said: "Most people with potential warning

symptoms don't have cancer, but some will and others may have other diseases that would benefit from early attention. That's why it's important that these symptoms are checked out, especially if they don't go away. But people could delay seeing a doctor if they don't acknowledge cancer as a possible cause.

"It's worrying that even the more obvious warning symptoms, such as unexplained lumps or changes to the appearance of a mole, were rarely attributed to cancer, although they are often well recognised in surveys that assess the public's knowledge of the disease. Even when people thought warning symptoms might be serious, cancer didn't tend to spring to mind. This might be because people were frightened and reluctant to mention cancer, thought cancer wouldn't happen to them, or believed other causes were more likely."

Overall, people taking part in the study appraised the cancer warning 'alarm' symptoms as more serious than 'non alarm' symptoms, such as sore throat and feeling tired, on the questionnaire list. Over half (59 per cent) of them contacted a doctor about their 'alarm' symptoms.

Sara Hiom, director of early diagnosis at Cancer Research UK, said: "Making that doctor's appointment is important. It's not a waste of time for the GP or the patient - it really could save your life. Diagnosing cancer early saves lives because it gives patients a better chance that treatments will be successful.

"Most cancers are picked up through people going to their GP about symptoms, and this study indicates that opportunities for early diagnosis are being missed. Its results could help us find new ways of encouraging people with worrying symptoms to consider [cancer](#) as a possible cause and to get them checked out straightaway with a GP."

More information: * 'Attributions of cancer 'alarm' symptoms in a

community sample' - Katriina L Whitaker, Suzanne E Scott, Kelly Winstanley, Una Macleod, Jane Wardle. Researchers based at: Health Behaviour Research Centre, Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, University College London; Unit of Social and Behavioural Sciences, King's College London, Dental Institute, London; Centre for Health and Population Sciences, Hull York Medical School, Hull.

** Data was from 1,724 respondents to the questionnaire, which was sent out in April 2012.

*** Over half the respondents (53 per cent) experienced at least one cancer 'alarm' symptom in the previous three months - persistent cough (20 per cent) and persistent change in bowel habits (18 per cent) were most common; difficulty swallowing and unexplained weight loss (both 4 per cent) were least common.

**** The cancer 'alarm' symptoms were from the Cancer Awareness Measure, which was based on warning signs from Cancer Research UK's website: Unexplained cough or hoarseness; persistent change in bowel habits; persistent unexplained pain; persistent change in bladder habits; unexplained lump; a change in the appearance of a mole; a sore that does not heal; unexplained bleeding; unexplained weight loss; persistent difficulty swallowing.

The 'non alarm' symptoms included in the questionnaire were: headache; shortness of breath; chest pain; feeling tired or having low energy; dizziness; feeling your heart pound or race; sore throat. These have potentially varying levels of seriousness and were included to mask the cancer context of the questionnaire.

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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