

# A cancer false alarm could discourage people from checking out future symptoms

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Cancer Research UK scientists have found that having a cancer false alarm could put people off checking out cancer symptoms they develop in the future.

More than 80 per cent of [patients](#) with potential [cancer symptoms](#) are given the all-clear after investigations. But according to research published by *BMJ Open*, having a false alarm might discourage people from seeking help, even years later, if they notice possible symptoms of

the disease again.

The researchers, from the Health Behaviour Research Centre at UCL (University College London), carried out a review, funded by Cancer Research UK, of 19 UK and international studies. It suggested that patients may delay seeking help for new or recurrent symptoms if they feel 'over-reassured' following a previous false alarm or felt under-supported at the time by the healthcare system.

If patients felt unsupported and believed they had been treated dismissively, some had concerns they might appear to be a hypochondriac or making a fuss if they had future symptoms checked out.

Several studies also reported that insufficient explanation or advice at the time of the false alarm, on possible causes of the symptoms or the next steps, left patients feeling that doctors could not help them, and unsure about what to do next.

Lead author Dr Cristina Renzi, a Cancer Research UK health expert at UCL, said: "Patients who go to their GP with symptoms are obviously relieved to find out that they don't have cancer. But, as our review showed, it's important that they don't have a false sense of security and understand they should still seek help if they notice new or recurrent symptoms. Having an all-clear now doesn't guarantee that you won't develop cancer in the future.

"It also appears to be important that patients are given the right support and information during and after cancer investigations so that, following a false alarm, they will still feel encouraged to get any new symptoms checked out quickly."

The researchers concluded that providing appropriate, balanced

information to patients who have a cancer false alarm, including making sure they don't feel foolish about having sought help, might encourage them to check out any future symptoms earlier. When cancer is diagnosed at an early stage, treatment is more likely to be successful.

The review indicated that over-reassurance could lead to patients, and sometimes clinicians, linking any future symptoms to the earlier all-clear. In the case of breast symptoms, a benign biopsy result appeared to give some women a false sense of security for many years, with some also reporting being less breast aware even though there would be no guarantee they could not develop breast cancer in the future.

Sara Hiom, Cancer Research UK's director of early diagnosis, said: "It's vitally important that anyone with possible cancer symptoms gets them checked out as soon as possible, and that includes people who have had a false alarm in the past. You're not wasting your doctor's time and may well save time in the long run - most cancers are picked up after patients seek help about symptoms and acting promptly on these can mean treatments are simpler and more effective.

"More research is needed into the best ways to ensure patients are never discouraged from talking to their GP about symptoms, even after receiving an all-clear."

**More information:** *BMJ Open*,  
[bmjopen.bmj.com/content/5/2/e007002.full](https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/5/2/e007002.full)

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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