

Queues build for GP appointments and cancer tests



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Patients are facing a double whammy of delays as GPs report struggling to meet appointment demand and increased waiting times for vital cancer tests, according to new findings from Cancer Research UK*.

The survey of 1,004 UK GPs, who were asked about their experiences in October, found the majority had also seen an increase in waiting times for tests commonly used to help diagnose cancer. 38% of GPs said their practice was finding it tough to meet demand for remote consultations, and 35% said the same for face-to-face appointments.

NHS England diagnostic waiting time data** shows the number of patients waiting six weeks or more for key tests has surged since March.

By the end of October, there were nine times more people waiting six weeks or more for an endoscopy test compared to end of October 2019 (more than 110,000 in 2020 vs around 12,500 in 2019), although this has improved since the worst point at the end of August.

And while the number of patients waiting six weeks or more for radiology tests (ultrasounds MRI and CT scans) has dropped since its peak in May, there are still 11 times more people (around 14,000 in October 2019 vs around 150,000 in October 2020) than last year.

Diagnosing cancer at an early stage means it can be treated more easily and gives the best chance of survival, so its important patients are seen as early as possible by their GP and swiftly sent on for tests, with results reported in a timely manner.

Dr Jodie Moffat, Cancer Research UK's head of early diagnosis, said: "GPs and NHS staff have worked incredibly hard during this challenging year to manage the increased strain Covid-19 has put on an already stretched system. But many patients are still a long way off receiving the swift cancer diagnoses that will give them the best chance of being treated successfully, and worryingly we don't yet know what the long-term impact on cancer stage and survival will be.

"It's crucial the government uses the cash boost set aside in the spending review for the NHS to sort the backlog of cancer patients."

Dr Neil Smith, Cancer Research UK's GP adviser, said: "GPs across the UK are doing everything we can to ensure people get the care they need so if you've noticed an unusual or persistent symptom, tell your doctor, we do want to hear from you. I'm particularly concerned we're seeing fewer elderly people and those who have symptoms that could be linked to lung cancer - like a cough that has lasted for three weeks or more.

"In most cases it won't be cancer, but if it is, catching it early gives the best chance of successful treatment. For those who've been unable to get through to your doctors' surgery, although it might be frustrating, I would encourage you to keep trying, GPs like me are still here to help you."

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