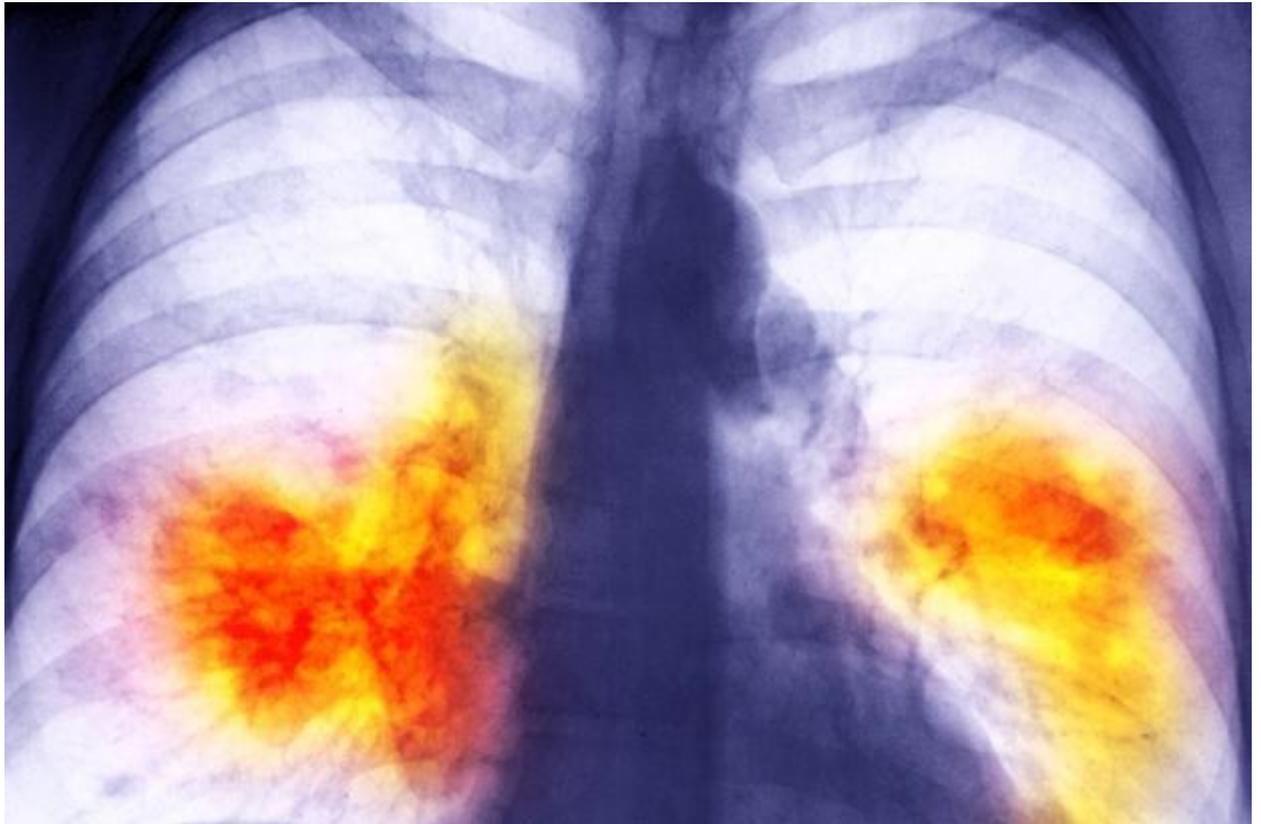


Too many GPs failing to detect lung cancer



• Three quarters of the patients in the study had consulted their GP about symptoms
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Many patients whose lung cancer is diagnosed after an emergency admission to hospital have previously tried and failed to see their GP, according to new research.

In England, 39 per cent of patients with lung cancer are diagnosed as an emergency in hospital and they have much poorer survival rates than patients diagnosed earlier.

Thomas Newsom-Davis, the study's lead author and consultant medical oncologist at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, said the NHS should consider allowing patients direct access to hospital treatment without going via their GPs.

Researchers from the London Cancer Alliance and King's College London investigated about 130 patients diagnosed with the disease after attending one of seven London hospitals as an emergency.

Nearly half of the patients said something had put them off going to see their GP, including having trouble making an appointment, not being able to see their usual doctor, a lack of confidence in the GP or fear of what the doctor might find.

The study also found a lack of awareness about lung cancer among the general public. One in five said they had not realised that their symptoms — which can include a persistent cough, shortness of breath, chest pain and coughing up blood — were serious.

Three quarters of the patients had consulted their GP about symptoms and a fifth had seen a GP at least three times. A quarter had already been referred to a hospital by a GP but many were admitted before the appointment after becoming more unwell.

Dr Newsom-Davis said there were “no easy answers” but that health service bosses should consider how GPs could be given more support, or whether patients should be allowed to access specialist lung doctors directly.

He added: “These findings show that we need to work together to improve patient education, ensure that those with possible lung cancer can easily make an appointment to see their GP, and that patients are quickly seen in specialist lung cancer clinics.

“It’s important to pilot ways of ensuring that patients with possible symptoms of cancer can be seen in hospital before they get so ill that they are admitted as an emergency, for example, rapid-access diagnostic clinics.”

The UK has one of the worst survival rates in Europe for lung cancer. Dr Newsom-Davis added: “If you look at the details of that, what you see is excess mortality occurs within the first year of diagnosis.

“It is not that we don’t have enough access to fancy drugs, it is to do with advanced stage of disease when people are diagnosed.”

Late diagnosis meant that the cancer was much more difficult to cure, he said, and might mean the patient was too unwell even for treatments to prolong survival.

About 43,500 people are diagnosed with lung cancer each year in the UK, making it the second most commonly diagnosed cancer in the country. Some 35,400 people die of the disease each year.

Dr Robert Rintoul, of the National Cancer Research Institute, said: “If lung cancer is diagnosed at an early stage, patients have a much higher chance of surviving the disease. Therefore it’s vital that patients recognise possible symptoms early on and are able to get them checked out quickly.

“This study provides valuable information to suggest ways to help ensure that far fewer patients have an emergency diagnosis of lung cancer, when their disease is likely to be more advanced and treatment is less likely to be successful.”