

Older cancer women referred later

GPs are less likely to refer older women with suspected ovarian cancer for investigation compared with younger women patients, a study suggests.

Analysis of electronic patient records found that 66% of women aged over 70 had been referred to a specialist, compared with 82% of women under 55.

It also took longer for GPs to refer elderly patients for further tests.

Survival rates for cancer in the UK are among the lowest in Europe, particularly for older people.

The research, published in the British Journal of Cancer, suggests that age has an impact on how GPs manage women with ovarian cancer.

Researchers at the Brighton and Sussex Medical School studied patient records during the period 2002 to 2006.

" Prompt referral by GPs could play a significant role in improving the UK's poor survival rates for ovarian cancer "
Peter Reynolds, Ovarian Cancer Action

They found that women aged between 45 and 69 years tended to be referred for gynaecological investigation within ten weeks of coming to their GP with symptoms. For women aged 75 to 79 years, the figure rose to 20 weeks.

"Ovarian cancer is a relatively rare disease but, as with all cancers, early diagnosis is important for improving the chances of successful treatment," said Rosemary Tate, lead author of the study.

Rates of diagnoses

The study also compared the rates of recorded diagnoses of ovarian cancer in the GPs' database with those in the UK cancer registries and found they were much lower.

These differences in rates were much larger for patients over 60 years old.

Researchers say this may be because GPs are less likely to record cancer diagnoses in older people if they have other serious illnesses. They may also be less motivated to investigate elderly patients for other problems first.

Peter Reynolds, chief executive of Ovarian Cancer Action, said it was unacceptable if older women were experiencing delays in referral.

"Women's chances of surviving ovarian cancer greatly improve if the disease is diagnosed at an early stage, so prompt referral by GPs could play a significant role in improving the UK's poor survival rates for ovarian cancer," he said.

Sara Hiom, director of health information at Cancer Research UK, echoed his comments: "Ovarian cancer is more common in older women, with four out of five cases in women over 50, so it's concerning if these older women are indeed less likely to be investigated."

The charity Target Ovarian Cancer said it was launching this week an online GP ovarian cancer learning tool, to help GPs make quicker and more accurate referrals.

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/health/8545105.stm>

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