Thousands of cancer patients dying needlessly as GPs not referring quickly enough says report

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## **Experts have found a link between the chance a patient would die and the likelihood of their doctor referring them to a specialist**

Thousands of cancer patients are needlesly dying because GPs are not referring them quickly enough, a major report warns.

Previous studies have suggested the earlier suspected cancer patients are sent to a specialist, the better their chances of survival.

But this research is the first to directly analyse the impact of GP referral rates with cancer deaths.

The findings are clear.

Deaths are higher in cancer patients whose GPs do not regularly send patients through the two-week urgent referral route for suspected cancer, according to the study funded by Cancer Research UK and the National Institute for Health Research.

The research - published in the [British Medical Journal](http://www.mirror.co.uk/all-about/british-medical-journal) - looked at data from more than 215,000 cancer patients in England.

Experts at King’s College London found a clear link between the chance a patient would die, and the likelihood of their GP practice to refer cancer patients to a specialist using the two-week urgent referral route.

Death rates were seven per cent higher in patients from GP practices which used the two-week urgent referral route least often compared with practices with a typical referral rate.

The urgent two-week referral pathway for patients with suspected cancer was set up more than a decade ago.

The frequency with which GPs use the service varies across England.

And the impact on cancer survival of referring [cancer](http://www.mirror.co.uk/all-about/cancer)patients to specialists via this route has not been previously measured.

Lead author Prof Henrik Moller, epidemiologist at King’s College London, said: “This study shows the first link between using the urgent referral route and deaths in cancer patients.

“Increasing a GP’s cancer awareness and their likelihood of urgently referring cancer patients could help reduce deaths. There’s a fine line to tread between using the urgent referral route regularly and using it too much - which the NHS isn’t equipped to respond to. But if GP practices which use the two-week route rarely, were to use it more often, this could reduce deaths of cancer patients.”

Sara Hiom, Cancer Research UK’s director of early diagnosis, added: “This crucial evidence shows that the earlier a cancer patient is diagnosed the better the chances of survival.

“Earlier cancer can be treated more effectively with a wider range of treatment options. And tumours can progress if there’s a delay in time to diagnosis and starting treatment.

“It’s never been clearer that reducing late diagnosis saves lives and this research adds to our understanding of what can be done about it.”