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NINE IN TEN SURVIVE EARLY STAGE BOWEL CANCER

NINE in ten people with bowel cancer that is caught early will survive the disease, according to new statistics published today (Tuesday).

Experts believe this shows how vital it is for people with possible symptoms to get them checked out so that any cancer can be diagnosed as early as possible.

They also say that this highlights the importance of taking part in bowel cancer screening when invited.

The latest figures are the first to be based on national statistics and are published by the National Cancer Intelligence Network (NCIN) and the Northern and Yorkshire Cancer Registry and Information Service (NYCRIS).

Doctors say that this good news is mainly because of improved surgical techniques.

Professor David Forman, director of NYCRIS and information lead for the NCIN, said: "It's really encouraging that more people with bowel cancer will now be successfully treated, if the disease is caught at the earliest stage.

"But overall, only half of people with bowel cancer survive, so this shows how crucial it is that the disease is spotted early.

"More than 80 per cent of bowel cancer cases occur in people over 60. Bowel cancer screening is now available for people in this age group and it can pick up changes that could be the earliest sign of cancer. Pilot screening programmes showed that over half of cancers detected through screening are at the earliest stage.

"So it really important that people take part in screening when they're sent the kit – it could save their life."

Paul Finan, bowel cancer surgeon and chair of the NCIN's bowel cancer group, said: "The reason why more people are surviving early stage bowel cancer than ever before is mostly because of many improvements in surgery. This includes using less invasive techniques, and patients receiving better care around the time of surgery – like more sophisticated anaesthetic care and better care during hospital admission and recovery."

The NCIN looked at every case of bowel cancer diagnosed in England between 1996 and 2006 and the percentage of people that survived for at least five years.

The survival figures were grouped together by each of the four stages of bowel cancer, known as Dukes A, B, C, and D, with A being the earliest stage of the disease.

Only around 13 per cent of bowel cancers are diagnosed at stage A, so it is important to find ways to increase this proportion, including through bowel cancer screening.

Around 34 per cent of cases were recorded without details of the stage of the disease.

Chris Carrigan, head of the NCIN, said: "This is the first of many reports that the NCIN will produce, some of which will include detailed statistics on cancer – like the stage of cancer – that have never been brought together on a national scale.

"We know that most cancers are more likely to be treated successfully if they are spotted early, so it's important that we have a way to measure if this is happening.

"Through information like this, we can help to improve cancer services. We can figure out which cancers are being diagnosed at a later stage and suggest policies and health campaigns to address these issues."

ENDS

For media enquiries please contact Rachel Gonzaga in the press office on 020 7061 8252 or, out-of-hours, the duty press officer on 07050 264 059.

Notes to editors:

Previous survival for bowel cancer at an early stage was estimated to be around 83 per cent, but these statistics were not national.

NYCRIS is the lead cancer registry for colorectal cancer.

About Bowel Screening

The national bowel screening programme in Scotland started in June 2007 to be rolled out across the whole country over two years. Men and women aged between 50 and 74 years are sent a stool testing kit every 2 years.

In Wales the NHS plans to test people between the ages of 50 and 74 every two years. Men and women aged between 60 and 69 from October 2008 receive stool testing kits. The NHS hopes to have rolled the service out to everyone else in the target age group by 2015.

In Northern Ireland the NHS plans to start screening in 2009.

Symptoms of bowel cancer

The symptoms of colorectal cancer can be

- Bleeding from the back passage (rectum) or blood in your stools
- A change in normal bowel habits towards diarrhoea or looser stools that lasts longer than 6 weeks
- A lump that your doctor can feel in the right side of your abdomen, or in your rectum
- A straining feeling in the rectum
- Losing weight
- Pain in your abdomen or rectum
- Anaemia (a low level of red blood cells)
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Because bowel tumours can bleed at times, cancer of the bowel often causes a shortage of red blood cells. This is called anaemia. It can lead to tiredness and sometimes breathlessness.

Sometimes cancer of the bowel can cause a blockage. The symptoms of this are

- Gripping pains in the abdomen
- Feeling bloated
- Constipation
- Being sick

About the National Cancer Intelligence Network (NCIN)

- The NCIN was established in June 2008 and its remit is to coordinate the collection, analysis and publication of comparative national statistics on diagnosis, treatment and outcomes for all types of cancer
- As part of the National Cancer Research Institute, the NCIN aims to promote efficient and effective data collection at each stage of the cancer journey
- Patient care will be monitored by the NCIN through expert analyses of up-to-date statistics
- The NCIN will drive improvements in the standards of care and clinical outcomes through exploiting data
- The NCIN will support audit and research programmes by providing cancer information
- Visit www.ncin.org.uk for more information