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## Research reinforces importance of bowel cancer screening

A leading North East doctor has highlighted the importance of bowel cancer screening. Professor Colin Rees, who works at South Tyneside District Hospital, led new research which indicates that bowel cancer patients may do better if diagnosed through screening.

Professor Rees, who is one of the UK's leading experts in endoscopy (a procedure where the inside of the body is examined) and screening, said: "We know that bowel screening saves lives: this research suggests that the way we diagnose some patients seems to make a difference to how well those patients do. Even taking into account differences in gender, location of tumour, underlying health and backgrounds, patients with later-stage bowel cancer were more likely to survive the disease if they were diagnosed through screening."

The national bowel cancer screening programme is offered to people in England aged 60 to 74, who are sent a stool testing kit every two years. The test looks for blood in stool samples, allowing the disease to be detected before symptoms become apparent.

Last year, South Tyneside District Hospital became the first hospital in the country to offer 'Bowelscope' screening to men and women around their 55th birthday. This additional test involves using a small tube to look at the inside of the lower bowel to find any small growths, or polyps, which may develop into bowel cancer if left untreated. Removing the polyps reduces the likelihood of people getting bowel cancer.

The latest study, which has been published in the British Journal of Cancer, follows earlier research from the same team that suggested patients whose bowel cancers were detected through screening could have a better chance of beating the disease because screening, generally, picks up cancers at an earlier stage when treatment is more likely to be effective.

In the latest research, researchers from Durham and Leeds universities worked with colleagues in hospitals across Tyneside to compare more than 300 screen-detected bowel cancers with almost 200 same-stage cancers diagnosed in people who had a negative bowel cancer screening test but then developed symptoms in the two-year gap before their next test. Their findings, suggesting that patients with later-stage cancers also do better if their disease is picked up through screening, indicate that there may be other factors at play in addition to early diagnosis.



Professor Rees added: “Research is ongoing but, even though we do not yet have all the answers, we know that bowel cancer screening saves lives. Cancer diagnosed through screening is likely to be at an earlier stage making it easier to treat but, even if diagnosed at a later stage, our research shows diagnosis through screening seems to mean patients have a better chance of doing well. Unfortunately, only around 58 per cent of people who are offered bowel screening in the UK complete their testing kits so it is very important that everyone offered the test takes it.

“It is also important to say that even if they have had a normal screening result they should see a doctor if they notice any unusual changes in the body – such as bleeding from the bottom or persistent changes in bowel habits. It may be something much less serious but, if it is cancer, getting it diagnosed at an early stage can really make a difference.”

- Bowel cancer is the third most common cancer in the UK, with more than 41,600 people diagnosed each year and just under 15,700 dying from the disease. When bowel cancer is found at the earliest stage, more than 90 per cent of people survive the disease for at least five years

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*Pictured above: The photograph shows Professor Colin Rees*

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