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‘Don’t ignore signs of bowel cancer’

A Consultant Gastroenterologist at the Royal United Hospital says people are risking their lives by ignoring the early signs and symptoms of bowel cancer.

John Linehan says going to your GP as soon as you have any concerns could lead to early detection of cancer, which in turn boosts your chances of survival after treatment.

He says: “Anyone who has blood in their poo or has had looser stools for three to four weeks should not hesitate to visit their GP.

“Some people may be reluctant to go to their GP about issues like this because they may find it embarrassing, but it really is best to get it checked out as soon as possible. Bowel cancer is the second biggest cancer killer but the earlier you are seen, the more chance you have of being treated successfully.”

The RUH takes part in a screening campaign which sees men and woman aged 60-69 sent self-test kits through the post for them to send back a stool sample to the laboratory.

Lab analysis can find tiny spots of blood, which are invisible to the eye but give an indication that further investigation is needed.

Since April 2009, about 39,000 people locally have sent back the postal kits that were posted to them. This has resulted in 704 patients having further investigations for bowel cancer at the RUH, such as colonoscopy.

Of these, 62 were found to have cancer and a further 302 were discovered to have premalignant growths, which were subsequently removed before they turned cancerous.

Dr Linehan says: “The screening programme has been hugely successful and we are diagnosing patients with cancer much earlier, because they are finding out they have it before they would otherwise even have thought about going to see their GP.”

A national campaign – Be Clear on Bowel Cancer – was launched this week following a trial in the south west last year. It aims to raise awareness that blood in your poo or looser poo can be early signs of bowel cancer. If England’s survival rates were to match the best in Europe for bowel cancer, 1,700 lives each year could be saved.

The campaign will encourage people to see their doctor straight away if they are experiencing any of the symptoms. These messages will be communicated via various channels, including TV, radio and print adverts, events and social media.

Ends

Notes to editors

Bowel cancer affects 33,000 people every year in England with the majority of cases occurring in people over the age of 55. There are 13,000 deaths a year but it can be less deadly if spotted and diagnosed early. More than 90 per cent of people diagnosed with bowel cancer at an early stage survive for at least five years compared with only six per cent of those diagnosed at a late stage.