

Dr Rosemary Leonard

GETTING TO
THE HEART OF
MEDICAL MATTERS



Q I was treated five years ago for cancer in my right breast. About a month ago I found a lump on the outside of my left arm which doesn't hurt at all.

I went to see my doctor who said she thinks it's a lipoma and nothing to worry about, but has referred me for a scan. I still haven't got my appointment, which has surprised me.

Surely because I've had cancer before I should have been seen within two weeks?

A A lipoma is a fatty lump that usually occurs between the skin and the underlying muscle layer. They have a characteristic "doughy" feel and are not tender when pressed.

They commonly occur in the neck, shoulders, back, arms and thighs and are usually less than 5cm in diameter but occasionally can grow larger.

The cause isn't known, but they tend to appear in people between the age of 40 and 60, and they can run in families.

Lipoma can usually be diagnosed via an ultrasound scan.

The "two-week wait" system is for GPs to use when they suspect a patient has cancer and is done via a special form which is sent via email. All patients referred via this system should be seen by a hospital specialist within two weeks.

If a GP suspects you may have signs that a previous cancer may have spread, the usual procedure is to write a letter to the hospital department where the patient has previously been treated and ask for an urgent appointment.

But if you develop symptoms that are almost certainly nothing to do with a previous cancer and your doctor is not concerned about them, then the referral should be done in the routine way and this is what I think has happened in your case.

Though it is understandable that you are worried about having a lump, it would be very unusual for breast cancer to spread to the top of the arm, and cancerous lumps are nearly always fairly hard, not spongy.

The reality is that if GPs refer too many patients on the two-week wait system, it breaks down and those with probable cancer symptoms have to wait longer to be seen.

Waiting lists for routine appointments at most hospitals are currently very long, but your surgery may be able to give you some idea of how long you will have to wait for your scan.

Q I'm 51 and my periods stopped about six months ago. I'm now having real problems with flushes,



Worried about lump on arm following my breast cancer

sweats and mood swings, but am terrified of going on HRT because of what happened to my mother.

She had hormone implants for years and said they made her feel wonderful, but then she developed breast cancer and was told that this

was because the HRT had given her really high oestrogen levels.

Luckily her treatment - mastectomy, radiotherapy, chemo - was successful, but there is no way I want to repeat her experience.

I've tried herbal treatments but

they've done nothing. Is there anything else that would help?

A Oestrogen implants used to be a popular way of giving HRT. They were inserted under the skin and slowly released the hormone over the next six months, but they could give

very high levels of oestrogen, particularly if repeated implants were inserted over several years.

They are very rarely used now and instead oestrogen is usually given via tablets, patches or gel that is applied daily to give a steady low dose.

The hormone progesterone has to be given as well to protect the womb lining, either via a patch or tablets. Combined HRT can very slightly increase the risk of breast cancer, but to put this in perspective, drinking alcohol each day is more of a risk.

However, if you would prefer not to have hormone treatment, then antidepressants tablets, such as venlafaxine or fluoxetine have been shown to reduce flushes and sweats and can help with mood swings.

Many women are reluctant to take these, but they are not addictive and, at low doses, side effects are usually not a problem, so they can be something to consider.

They are available on prescription from your GP.

Q I'm 81 and for the past year I've had discomfort around the bottom of my left rib cage as if there's a tight band around it.

It's worse when I'm active, such as walking or gardening, so at first I assumed it was a pulled muscle. But it isn't getting any better.

Would special exercises help?

A Pain around the left rib cage can have a wide range of causes, which can include arthritis in the thoracic spine, the section of the backbone where the ribs attach at the back.

It can also be caused by issues in the upper digestive system, especially the stomach, and also problems in the left lung.

More importantly left-sided chest pain, especially if it feels like pressure or a tight band that is worse on exercise, can be a sign of angina.

This is pain caused by shortage of oxygen in the heart muscle due to narrowed arteries.

If left untreated, this can put you at increased risk of having a heart attack, when one of the arteries supplying the heart muscle is completely blocked.

So please contact your GP as soon as possible, who can arrange for appropriate investigations and treatment to be done.

● If you have a health question for Dr Leonard, email her in confidence at yourhealth@express.co.uk. Dr Leonard regrets she cannot enter into personal correspondence or reply to everyone.



Prostate cancer warning signs to look out for when you go to the toilet

Recent figures show there are around 48,000 prostate cancer diagnoses in the UK every year - that's around 129 every day, according to the charity Prostate Cancer UK. But detecting issues as early as possible can go a long way to ensuring positive outcomes, and experts are advising men - particularly those over 40 - to be aware of any changes in their toilet habits to give themselves the best chance.

Leading oncologist Dr Jiri Kubes, senior

physician at the Proton Therapy Centre in Prague, insists this can provide a potentially life-saving early warning that there could be something wrong.

"As with any change in your body, you should keep a close eye on it and seek advice from your GP as soon as possible," says Dr Kubes.

"The main warning signs you are likely to experience when going to the toilet are an increased need to urinate during the day

and night, a slow or interrupted flow and a feeling of still needing to urinate even when you have finished. It may be more difficult to start your flow and there could even be traces of blood in your urine. Sometimes those with prostate cancer will also experience discomfort when sitting down.

"In some cases there will be absolutely nothing to worry about, but it is vital to consult with an expert if you have any doubts whatsoever."