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Fears over the coronavirus are being blamed for a 60% fall in urgent cancer referrals in England - with those for breast cancer down 78%, according to new figures.

Experts say far fewer people are coming forward with cancer symptoms because they are worried about catching the **virus** or overburdening staff.

The NHS England data records the number of people seen by a specialist within two weeks of being referred by their GP.

There were 79,573 referrals in April 2020, compared with 199,217 in April 2019.

Urgent breast cancer referrals plunged from 16,753 to 3,759 for the same period.

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Cancer treatment has also been significantly affected.

Doctors says people are worried about visiting hospital because of the coronavirus

Almost 26% of patients had to wait more than two months for their first treatment after an urgent referral.

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Doctors have warned of a potential **"surge" in cases** in the coming months as people grow more confident in seeking medical help again.

As many as 36,000 cancer surgeries may also end up being pushed back in the UK due to the virus crisis, according to Birmingham University.

Sarah Woolnough, from Cancer Research UK, said the COVID-19 crisis was having a "devastating" effect on cancer patients and that "tens of thousands" were in a backlog for care.

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"Patients need to know that cancer hospitals are a safe place to go, and that's why we are calling for the government and the NHS to make this happen as quickly as possible," she said.

Ms Woolnough said frequent testing of hospital staff and patients was vital so vulnerable patients are not put at risk.

NHS cancer chief Professor Peter Johnson said staff were working "incredibly hard" to ensure cancer care and procedures

Coronavirus fears blamed for 60% fall in cancer referrals in England

COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS NHS



Breast cancer referrals were down from 16,753 to 3,759 compared with last year



can go ahead.

He urged people to still visit their GP if they have cancer worries, but conceded that people had been put off due to the "fear of catching the virus or not wanting to burden staff".

Worries about **COVID-19** are also being blamed for a 42% fall in Accident and Emergency attendances last month.

A&E attendances were down 42% last month, and emergency admissions 27%

There were 1.3 million attendances recorded, down from 2.2 million in May 2019, according to NHS England.

It's a slight improvement on April - at the height of the crisis - when the number dropped 57% to 916,581.

Emergency admissions to casualty departments also fell 27% last month, from 547,382 a year ago to 398,407. That's the second lowest since current records began in August 2010.

More than one in seven patients also had to wait up to 18 weeks for routine operations, according to the NHS England figures.

Many operations were cancelled to allow hospitals to cope better with the coronavirus emergency and it is the worst performance by the 18-week standard since it began recording.

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