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Receiving a screen-detected diagnosis of cancer: The experience of participants in the UK flexible sigmoidoscopy trial.

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The experience of receiving a screen-detected diagnosis of colorectal cancer was explored using open-ended interviews. Twenty four people who had been diagnosed with cancer at flexible sigmoidoscopy screening were interviewed at their homes over the telephone. Thematic analysis of the transcripts showed that the experience of gaining a diagnosis of cancer through screening was characterized by a lack of prior expectation that cancer would be detected and feelings of shock. This was largely because of the absence of symptoms and current feelings of well-being. Some interviewees expressed feelings of relief and gratitude at having cancer diagnosed at an early enough stage that 'something could be done about it'. The experience of receiving a screen-detected diagnosis could be summarised as one of 'moderated shock' whereby the shock of the unexpected diagnosis was often moderated by the news that the cancer had been caught early. While these screen-detected cancers were diagnosed relatively rapidly, a significant number of interviewees had a period in which they were effectively 'symptomatic' (e.g. knew they had an adenoma but did not know whether it was malignant or benign). However, they did not use this period to prepare themselves for a possible cancer diagnosis. Raising awareness of the adenoma-carcinoma sequence may help reduce the shock of a screen-detected diagnosis. However, any interventions aimed at reducing the distress of a screen-detected cancer would need to consider the overall benefit to screening attenders, most of whom will have benign polyps detected. Copyright 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.