COVID-19 Vaccines for Cancer Patients

The COVID-19 vaccines are safe and should be effective even for people with advanced cancer.

March 15, 2021 By Liz Highleyman

People living with cancer—including those on treatment—should receive COVID-19 vaccines as soon as possible, experts say.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's vaccine priority list includes people over age 65 and those with health conditions—including cancer—that put them at risk for severe COVID-19. New guidelines from the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) recommend that all people with cancer should get a vaccine and advise caregivers and people living in the same household to get vaccinated too.

People on cancer treatment were excluded from COVID-19 vaccine trials, but there's no reason to think the vaccines won't be safe for them. People with certain types of cancer and those receiving immune-suppressing treatment may not respond as well because they have low levels of white blood cells that produce antibodies—key players in vaccine reponse. But the vaccines should still provide partial protection—important because some cancer patients, especially those with blood cancers or lung cancer, are at higher risk for COVID-19 complications.

NCCN recommends that people on immunosuppressive treatment should delay vaccination until their white blood cell counts recover. People undergoing major surgery should wait at least a few days. But everyone else should get a vaccine as soon as they can.

"I have no real concerns that there will be big surprises when it comes to safety for the cancer patient population," says Gary Lyman, MD, MPH, of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle. "The risk to these patients from COVID is high, and the risks from the vaccines appear very low."

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