Most Cancer Survivors Have Underlying Medical Conditions Associated With Severe COVID-19

Cancer, heart disease and diabetes are just some underlying medical conditions associated with an increased risk of severe COVID-19 illness.

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New study finds more than half (56.4%) of cancer survivors in the United States reported having additional underlying medical conditions associated with severe COVID-19 illness. The report appearing in JNCI: The Journal of the National Cancer Institute, suggests that prevalence of these conditions among cancer survivors is nearly 40% higher than that in the general population.

Cancer, and other underlying medical conditions, including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, heart diseases, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, and obesity, are associated with increased risk of severe COVID-19 illness. For this study, investigators Changchuan (Charles) Jiang, MD, PhD, Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center, Xuesong Han, PhD, American Cancer Society, and colleagues used data from the 2016-2018 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), a national cross-sectional survey of the civilian, noninstitutionalized population, to examine the prevalence of underlying medical conditions associated with severe COVID-19 Illness in adult cancer survivors in the U.S.

“This study investigates the prevalence and factors associated with these underlying medical conditions among cancer survivors in the U.S. We felt it was important to compile and analyze the available data to inform the public and guide the policy makers on opportunities to prevent and control severe COVID-19–associated illness through strategies such as risk-stratified vaccine distribution,” said Jiang.

Most cancer survivors reported having more than one of the conditions associated with severe COVID-19 illness and nearly one-quarter reported more than two conditions. These conditions were more prevalent in survivors of kidney, liver and uterine cancers, as well as Black survivors, those with low socioeconomic status, and public insurance.

Older age was associated with higher prevalence of medical conditions among cancer survivors and adults without a cancer history. However, even in the youngest age group (18 to 44 years), nearly half of cancer survivors (47.6%) had at least one additional condition associated with

severe COVID-19 illness. In addition to increasing prevalence with age, medical conditions were more prevalent among male survivors (59.9%), those with less than high school completion (68.0%), non-Hispanic Black (67.2%), low income (71.7%), and those living in the South (59.2%).

“The findings highlight the need to protect survivors against COVID-19 transmission and to prioritize cancer survivors in vaccine allocation,” said Han.

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