Oncologists Urge Americans to Get Cancer Screenings Back on Track

Studies have shown an alarming drop in screenings—and more advanced cancer—during the COVID-19 pandemic.

April 20, 2021 By Liz Highleyman

A national public awareness campaign is reminding Americans to resume cancer screenings, after several studies have revealed an alarming drop-off in 2020.

Regular screening can detect several types of cancer at an early stage, when they are easier to treat. Experts recommend regular screenings for breast cancer, cervical cancer, colorectal cancer, lung cancer, prostate cancer and skin cancer, including melanoma, usually starting at age 40 or 50. Screenings are particularly important for people with a family history of cancer or other risk factors. People with liver cirrhosis (for example, due to hepatitis B or C or fatty liver disease) should also be monitored for liver cancer.

The "Time to Screen" campaign is a partnership between the Community Oncology Alliance (COA), a national nonprofit advocacy group for independent oncology practices, and CancerCare, a nonprofit that provides support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer.

"COVID-19 has caused many people to delay recommended cancer screenings, which are now at dangerously low levels," COA president Kashyap Patel, MD, of Carolina Blood and Cancer Care in Rock Hill, South Carolina, said in a press release. "It's safer to get screened now, rather than delaying getting checked for cancer, because early detection catches cancer when it's most treatable. It may even save your life."

Health care facilities are following guidelines to keep people safe, including COVID-19 testing for health care staff and patients, requiring face covering and limiting crowds. Health care workers were among the first to be eligible for COVID-19 vaccines, and vaccination is recommended for people with cancer.

A study published in the November 2020 issue of JCO Clinical Cancer Informatics showed a considerable drop in cancer screening, diagnosis and treatment for older adults in 2020, including an 85% decline in breast cancer screenings, a 75% decrease in colon cancer screenings, a 74%

decline in prostate cancer screenings and a 56% drop in lung cancer screenings. Although screening rates have rebounded substantially since the initial COVID-19 crisis, screening rates for the top four cancer types remain below pre-pandemic rates.

In a June 2020 editorial in Science magazine, National Cancer Institute director Norman Sharpless, MD, estimated that reduced screening for six months due to COVID-19 and the resulting delays in diagnosis and treatment could lead to nearly 10,000 extra deaths from breast cancer and colorectal cancer over the next decade.

Unfortunately, doctors are already seeing an uptick in late-stage cancer diagnoses. For example, a study presented at the recent European Lung Cancer Virtual Congress found that people with non-small-cell lung cancer presented with brain metastasis at a higher rate during the pandemic (39%) compared with historical rates of around 25%, Healio reports. A study at last year's San Antonio Breast Cancer Symposium showed that more people receiving care at Kaiser Permanente Northern California presented with advanced-stage and aggressive breast cancer during the first two months of California's COVID-19 stay-at-home order compared with the same period in 2019, according to Healio. During the pandemic, 78% presented with symptomatic disease versus 37% the year before. And a national survey by the American Society for Radiation Oncology earlier this year found that new patients were coming in for radiation therapy with more advanced-stage cancers, while many existing patients experienced pandemic-related interruptions to their treatment.

"Time to Screen" makes it easy for people to learn more about the importance of early cancer detection and to schedule screening appointments at a convenient location. The campaign provides assistance and educational resources, including a toll-free hotline and a website featuring information about screenings for several types of cancer. The campaign will also feature multimedia advertising, television and radio interviews and more.

"Early detection of cancers through regular screenings saves lives," said CancerCare CEO Patricia Goldsmith. "Through this campaign, we will not only be raising awareness of the importance of getting cancer screenings back on track but also providing important support services to help overcome any barriers that individuals need to access their cancer screenings."

Support for the "Time to Screen" campaign is provided by several major pharmaceutical companies.

Visit www.TimeToScreen.org or call toll-free 855-53-SCREEN (855-537-2733) to find a cancer screening option near you.

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