Survey: Cancer Patients Increasingly Face COVID-19 Health Impact

Second survey finds more delays in care, financial strain and negative mental health effects

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Cancer patients and survivors are finding it increasingly challenging to get necessary health care as the COVID-19 pandemic persists. Many are experiencing financial stress and mental health issues as they try to navigate the difficult health and economic environment.

An American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN) survey of cancer patients and survivors focused on COVID-19 effects found 87% of respondents said the pandemic had affected their health care in some manner, up from 51% in an April survey. Of those in active treatment 79% reported delays to their health care (up from 27%), including 17% of patients who reported delays to their cancer therapy like chemotherapy, radiation or hormone therapy. The most commonly reported effects for those in active treatment were for changes to in-person cancer provider appointments (57%*); and delays in access to imaging services (25% up from 20%) and surgical procedures (15% up from 8%). Delayed access to supportive services, including physical therapy or mental health care, remained steady (20%).

Nearly one in four patients surveyed say the pandemic has made it more difficult to contact their providers with questions about their health care needs, and one in five say they are worried their cancer could be growing or returning due to delays and interruptions caused by the COVID-19 outbreak.

“The situation is getting worse, not better for cancer patients during this pandemic,” said Lisa Lacasse, president of the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN). “Health practitioners continue to work to balance safety for an immunocompromised population at increased risk for contracting COVID with timely treatment to prevent the spread of cancer. Unfortunately, this results in delays in treatment for many cancer patients.”

Patients are also under significant financial strain. Forty-six percent said the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted their financial situation and ability to pay for care in some way (up from 38%). And nearly a quarter (23%) said they worry they may lose their health insurance due to the pandemic and its effects on the economy.

While a majority of respondents said they are sheltering in place, 18% said they were working

outside the home, including 11% of those still in active treatment. More than a third (34%) of patients say they're anxious the pandemic will make it hard to afford basic household expenses; concerns that are especially prevalent among lower-income patients with more than half (54%) of those earning $30,000 or less reporting that they're worried about affording essentials like rent, food and utilities

This combined medical and financial stress has resulted in nearly half (48%) of patients saying the COVID-19 pandemic has had a moderate or major effect on their mental health. In particular, 67% said they worry it will be harder for them to stay safe when social distancing and other restrictions are relaxed in their area, and 70% of patients worry they will be unable to find protective equipment like gloves or masks to help keep them safe.

The survey also collected feedback from a small group of providers and caregivers who similarly reported concern about delayed care and difficulties providing support for patients while being unable to see them, as well as a lack of personal protective equipment. Caregivers, like patients, reported anxiety over reopening and the increased potential for their and their loved one's exposure to the virus.

"A cancer diagnosis brings any number of challenges and stressors, but right now it's even more fraught with additional barriers to timely and affordable care that could be further exacerbated by job loss – like millions of Americans have already endured," said Lacasse. "COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on the barriers to affordable health care that cancer patients have long faced. The survey responses highlight the increasing and urgent need for Congress to swiftly pass measures that help these patients alleviate their physical, financial and emotional strain during and beyond the pandemic."

The web-based survey was taken by more than 1,200 cancer patients and survivors. This sample provides a margin of error +/- 3% and 96% confidence level. Additional input was provided by 111 caregivers and 139 health care providers supporting cancer patients and survivors.

A full polling memo can be found: https://bit.ly/3d4n8aR

*Previous survey did not distinguish between cancer provider and other in-person provider appointments therefore, no comparison is available.

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