Survey: COVID-19 Affecting Patients' Access to Cancer Care

Delays and financial strain dominate cancer patients' experience in pandemic

April 24, 2020 By American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network

Cancer patients and those who've recently completed treatment are finding it challenging to get necessary health care in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and many are experiencing financial stress trying to afford care in an increasingly difficult economic environment.

According to the latest survey from Survivor Views, a national cohort of cancer patients and survivors who complete surveys on a range of public policy issues important to the cancer community, half (51%) of all those surveyed reported some impact on their care due to the virus. Of those who've experienced an effect, nearly 1 in 4 report a delay in care or treatment. Among those 1 in 4, the most common delays were for in-person provider appointments (50%); delayed access to imaging services to determine if a patient's cancer had grown or returned (20%); access to supportive services, including physical therapy or mental health care (20%); and access to surgical procedures (8%).

Among just the respondents who remain in active treatment, more than a quarter (27%) report a delay in their care, and 13% say they don't know when it will be rescheduled.

One-third of all patients say they're worried about the impact COVID-19 will have on their ability to get care, a concern that is especially prevalent among patients in active treatment (40%).

"The health effects of this pandemic stretch well beyond those diagnosed and suffering from COVID-19 and are having an acute and adverse impact on cancer patients, many of whom can't afford treatment delays," said Lisa Lacasse, president of the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network. "Cancer patients are dealing with understandable, but in many cases, unsustainable delays in their care. This data shows the need for quick action in bolstering our health care system so we can both care for those diagnosed with the virus and for those facing a cancer diagnosis."

Like many across the country, cancer patients are also feeling economic stress in the wake of the pandemic. Nearly 4 in 10 (38%) respondents say COVID-19 is having a notable effect on their ability to afford their care, due mostly to reduced work hours (14%).

Reduced work hours and lost jobs are of particular concern because these have the potential to impact access to health insurance. Of the respondents who reported that they or a family member living with them had lost a job, 43% had employer-sponsored coverage. Of those who reported they or a family member had their hours reduced, 58% percent had employer-sponsored health insurance.

While the economic stress is prevalent across all respondents, the concern is especially pronounced among patients with lower- and middle-class incomes. Nearly half of those earning $30,000 or less say they're worried about affording their care (46%); more than a third (34%) of those earning up to $60,000 are worried and a quarter (25%) of those earning up to $110,000 are concerned.

"Cancer patients and survivors are facing threats on multiple fronts right now, including the struggle to get and afford health care," said Lacasse. "Now is the time for our lawmakers to do all they can to address and help alleviate these challenges."

Patient groups are asking Congress and the administration to take action on policy changes that would help patients. Those changes include, creating a special enrollment period so uninsured or underinsured Americans can enroll in comprehensive health plans established under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), increased funding for state Medicaid programs and subsidies to help people who lose their employer-sponsored health care afford their health insurance premiums for up to six months.

"These changes would go a long way toward ensuring all patients—whether they have COVID-19 or another serious illness like cancer—can get and afford the care they need. We strongly urge Congress and the administration to consider these proposals and move quickly to enact them as they address this evolving crisis," said Lacasse.

The Survivor Views survey was conducted using a web-based instrument sent to 3,055 Survivor Views cohort members and promoted to non-panelist respondents through email and social media promotion. The survey was taken by more than 1,200 cancer patients and survivors between March 25 and April 8, 2020 and has a margin of error +/- 3% and 96% confidence level.

For more on the results: https://bit.ly/2V9TavE

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