American Association for Cancer Research Releases its Annual Cancer Progress Report

The report highlights how cancer research is extending and improving lives and includes a special feature on COVID-19 and cancer challenges.

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Today, the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) released the 10th edition of its annual Cancer Progress Report. The report highlights how cancer research, largely supported by federal investments in the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Cancer Institute (NCI), is extending and improving lives. It also includes a special feature on COVID-19 and Cancer that outlines how the COVID-19 pandemic has created many challenges in the field of cancer science and medicine, and what cancer researchers are doing to address these challenges.

The AACR Cancer Progress Report 2020 outlines advances made against cancer from August 1, 2019, to July 31, 2020, including:

- Thirty-five treatments were approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to treat several cancer types for the first time. This is the highest number ever reported in any prior Cancer Progress Report during the past 10 years. Among these treatments are:
  - one molecularly targeted therapeutic and one immunotherapeutic approved for treating cancers with a specific genetic biomarker regardless of the type of cancer;
  - the first PARP-targeted therapeutics for use in the treatment of prostate cancer and pancreatic cancer;
  - the first molecularly targeted therapeutic approved for treating a rare type of cancer called epithelioid sarcoma; and
  - the first antibody-drug conjugate for use in the treatment of an aggressive type of breast cancer called triple-negative breast cancer.

- According to the latest data, the U.S. cancer death rate declined by 29 percent from 1991 to 2017, a reduction that has saved 2.9 million lives.
- The cigarette smoking rate among U.S. adults has fallen to less than 14 percent, down from 42 percent in 1965, largely due to public education and important policy initiatives.

“We are very pleased to present the AACR Cancer Progress Report 2020, which details how medical research is powering unparalleled progress against the collection of devastating diseases we call cancer,” said AACR President Antoni Ribas, MD, PhD, FAACR. “The development of new cancer treatments and other medical products used in cancer care is made possible because of the tireless work of individuals across the spectrum of cancer science, from basic, translational, and clinical research.”

COVID-19 Has Substantially Impacted Cancer Research and Treatment

Despite the unprecedented challenges presented by the novel coronavirus pandemic, cancer researchers have continued to make progress for patients with cancer. Cancer researchers have also used their expertise to help the scientific community better understand, detect, treat, and work toward preventing COVID-19. For example, the National Cancer Institute (NCI) is part of the broader effort within the NIH to increase understanding of COVID-19 and is conducting the NCI COVID-19 in Cancer Patients Study (NCCAPS) to gain information that will support better management for people with cancer and COVID-19. Cancer researchers around the world are working together to accelerate a COVID-19 vaccine and therapeutic development, along with repurposing treatments used in cancer care for the benefit of patients with COVID-19.

While progress against cancer has continued during this challenging time, the pandemic has caused significant disruptions in cancer research, treatment, and patient care. The report’s Special Feature on COVID-19 and Cancer provides an overview of COVID-19, its impact on cancer screening and treatment, and what’s ahead for cancer patients, clinicians, and researchers as the pandemic continues.

According to the COVID-19 and Cancer Special Feature:

Data from electronic medical records from 190 hospitals spanning 23 states show that the number of screening tests for early detection of cervical, breast, and colon cancer conducted in the United States plummeted by 85 percent or more after the first COVID-19 case was reported in the United States.

79 percent of those who are actively undergoing treatment had to delay some aspect of their care as a result of COVID-19.

Delays in cancer screenings and treatment are projected to lead to more than 10,000 additional deaths from breast and colorectal cancer over the next decade.

There was a 74 percent decrease in the number of new patients enrolling in clinical trials during the first two weeks of May 2020 compared with the same period in 2019. Since then, enrollment in clinical trials has increased somewhat, but it still remains 30 percent lower than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the other hand, the changes that have been made to accommodate and protect patients on clinical trials during the pandemic, such as the increased use of telemedicine to deliver care and assess side effects, may have a long-term positive impact on cancer research by improving access to these trials for a larger, more diverse group of patients.

Cancer Research Remains a Vital Investment

The report emphasizes that despite the extraordinary progress we are making against cancer, the disease continues to pose enormous public health challenges.

According to the report:

- The number of new cancer cases is projected to increase dramatically in the coming decades. The U.S. is projected to go from just over 1.8 million cases in 2020 to more than 2.3 million by 2040. This sharp increase is anticipated largely because of overall population growth and because the segment of the U.S. population that accounts for most cancer diagnoses—those age 65 and older—is expanding.
- In 2020, it is estimated that 413,000 children ages <1 to 14 will develop cancer and that 328,000 children will die from the disease. If access to health care is not markedly improved, particularly in low and lower middle-income countries, it is anticipated that a total of 13.7 million cases of childhood cancer and 11.1 million deaths from childhood cancer will occur from 2020 to 2050.
- Disparities in cancer continue to exact an enormous toll on racial and ethnic minorities. Studies show that non-Hispanic Black children and adolescents who have cancer are more than 50 percent more likely to die from the cancer than non-Hispanic white children and adolescents who have cancer.

The report explains that the increasing burden of cancer underscores the need for continued transformative cancer research to develop new approaches to prevention, early detection, and treatment. It also calls for our elected leaders to:

- Continue to support robust, sustained, and predictable growth in the NIH and NCI budget by providing an increase of at least $3 billion and $522 million respectively in fiscal year (FY) 2021, for a total of $44.7 billion for the NIH and $6.9 billion for the NCI.
- Ensure that the funding designated through the 21st Century Cures Act for targeted initiatives, including the National Cancer Moonshot, is fully appropriated in FY 2021 and is supplemental to the increase in the NIH base budget.
- Support the FDA's critical regulatory science initiatives by providing an increase of at least $120 million in discretionary budget authority in FY 2021.
- Support the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Cancer Prevention and Control Programs with total funding of at least $559 million. This includes funding for comprehensive cancer control, cancer registries, and screening and awareness programs for specific cancers.

"During this challenging time, maintaining the momentum against cancer is more important than ever," said Margaret Foti, PhD, MD (hc), chief executive officer of the AACR. "The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted just how crucial the biomedical research community is to the health and safety of our country and, indeed, the world. We urgently need strong, consistent federal support for the NIH and NCI so that we can continue to understand, prevent, treat, and ultimately cure cancer as well as all diseases that threaten human lives."

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