Months into Coronavirus Pandemic, Cancer Patients Report Delayed Care and Anxiety

Survey shows coronavirus health care delays and anxiety persist for cancer patients and survivors months into pandemic.

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Cancer patients and survivors continue to experience potentially serious coronavirus-related health care delays and high levels of anxiety associated with the ongoing pandemic.

An American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN) survey found more than a quarter (26%) of cancer patients and survivors reported delays in their cancer care because of coronavirus. When looking at respondents in active treatment for their cancer, the number increased to nearly one in three (32%). This included 21% of patients in active treatment who reported a delayed or cancelled check-up or follow-up appointment specific to their cancer care, and nearly 1 in 10 (9%) whose medical facility-administered treatment—like chemotherapy or radiation—was affected.

A driving factor behind the delays is anxiety among providers and patients alike about the risk of contracting the virus. While most delays in care were due to logistical reasons, like closed facilities (48%), when combined an even greater percentage of delays were due to patients who delayed or cancelled care due to their own (31%) or their providers' (24%) concerns about patients contracting coronavirus. In total 64% of all respondents, and 74% of those in active treatment, said they were worried about their ability to stay safe if COVID-19 cases continue to increase.

"Seven months into this pandemic the continued delays cancer patients and survivors report are deeply concerning," said Lisa Lacasse, president of ACS CAN. "The ongoing spread of the virus threatens to upend critical treatment schedules and delay preventive and diagnostic services that could result in more late-term diagnoses and poorer cancer outcomes for years to come."

The survey also found 45% of respondents are worried if COVID-19 cases continue to rise the effect on the health care system will make it harder for them to access their cancer care. Already more than two-thirds of Americans report that their scheduled cancer screenings, such as mammograms and colonoscopies, have been delayed or skipped during the COVID-19 crisis.

According to the survey, access to comprehensive health care that covers all necessary services—during the pandemic and beyond—is patients' and survivors' top health-related priority (51%), followed by the availability of such coverage should someone's job change (20%). Nearly 1 in 5 (18%) patients and survivors surveyed prioritized reduced out-of-pocket costs for premiums, co-pays and deductibles and 8% identified reducing prescription drug costs as a top priority.

"Cancer patients and survivors are acutely aware of the critical importance of comprehensive health coverage and the need to have access to quality care even if your job changes or you're laid off," said Lacasse. "Sadly, the pandemic and its associated economic fallout have made these priorities clear to many millions more Americans. The survey underscores the imperative that elected lawmakers at every level of government prioritize access to affordable, comprehensive care that maintains protections for those with pre-existing conditions."

The web-based survey was taken by 2,081 cancer patients and survivors between August 27, 2020 and September 14, 2020. This sample provides a margin of error +/- 3% and 99% confidence level.

View the full polling memo.

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