Organizations Urge COVID-19 Vaccine Priority for Cancer Patients and Survivors

People living with cancer are at higher risk for severe illness and death due to COVID-19.

February 24, 2021 By Liz Highleyman

A coalition of 127 organizations and cancer centers have sent a letter to President Joe Biden, key members of his administration and leading public health officials at state health departments underscoring the importance of prioritizing patients with active cancer and cancer survivors for COVID-19 vaccines.

The signers of the letter represent oncology researchers, health care professionals, patient advocates and cancer patients and survivors of cancer from across the United States.

“There is mounting evidence that patients with cancer are at increased risk of severe illness and death” if they contract SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus that causes COVID-19, the letter states.

For example, a recent study in the Journal of the American Medical Association showed that cancer patients diagnosed with COVID-19 were more likely to require hospitalization than COVID-19 patients without cancer (47% versus 24%, respectively).

People with blood cancers, such as leukemia or lymphoma, or lung cancer are at particularly high risk. Patients with active or advanced cancer are likely to fare worse. Although studies of the effects of cancer treatment on COVID-19 outcomes have yielded mixed results, therapies that cause immune suppression seem to lead to poorer outcomes.

The American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) COVID-19 and Cancer Task Force recently published an article in the journal Cancer Discovery that reviewed 28 studies of mortality among cancer patients who developed COVID-19, finding that COVID-19 fatality rates were twice as high among people with cancer.

Moreover, the organizations noted in a press release, “patients with cancer often receive frequent in-person care, which increases their risk of exposure to the virus. Certain survivors of cancer also have a higher probability of infection and COVID-related death compared to the general population.”

The National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) recently issued guidelines recommending that people living with cancer should receive COVID-19 vaccines as soon as they are available and also advised that caregivers and people living in the same household should be vaccinated.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) developed a vaccine prioritization plan that put health care workers and residents of long-term care facilities first, followed by people over 75 and certain frontline essential workers. The CDC later expanded eligibility to include everyone over 65 and people with underlying health conditions, including cancer, that put them at risk for more severe COVID-19.

However, in an effort to speed up and streamline the vaccination process, many states have broadened and simplified their eligibility criteria. Some, for example, have gone to a fully age-based system.

"[W]hile mass, rapid vaccination is a worthy goal, the currently limited supply of vaccines means that many who are at high risk for severe illness and death from COVID-19, including patients with cancer and survivors of cancer, may continue to wait in line for many months if high-risk groups are not provided with priority access," the organizations state.

"[W]e sincerely hope that you and your colleagues in the administration will stress to all state public health departments that patients with active cancer and survivors of cancer must be provided priority access to a lifesaving COVID-19 vaccine," the letter concludes.

Signers of the letter, which was initiated by AACR, include the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, the American Society of Hematology, the Colorectal Cancer Alliance, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, Friends of Cancer Research, the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, Livestrong, LUNGevity, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, METAvivor, NCCN, the Oncology Nursing Society, the Society for Immunotherapy of Cancer, Stand Up To Cancer and many more.

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