Routine Cancer Screenings Plunge During COVID-19

Screening appointments for cervix, colon and breast cancer are down between 86% and 94%.

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Since March, Americans have been urged to delay routine mammograms and colonoscopies to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus. As a result, screenings for breast, cervix and colon cancer are down between 86% and 94%, according to new data from electronic medical records vendor Epic, reports STAT.

Epic used data from 2.7 million American patients whose records showed they had at least one screening for these cancers between 2017 and 2019. The data spanned 190 hospitals across 39 health systems in 23 states. The decrease in screenings is well beyond what is expected under normal variation.

The findings raise concerns that deadly cancers may go undetected if screening appointments aren't rescheduled soon—which they may not be. "We're also fairly convinced that even once they lift the lockdowns, we'll still see the concerned patient a little bit more reluctant to go in," said Carl Dvorak, president of Epic. "Truthfully, it doesn't take much to talk a person out of going in for a colonoscopy."

Although some folks are still getting screenings, Epic didn't investigate why in its research. Some may be individuals who are seriously concerned about their cancer risk, such as a woman who finds a large lump in her breast. Others simply may worry less about contracting the coronavirus during a clinic visit.

Dvorak hopes that Epic's data will help the health care facilities it serves plan ways to book those who have delayed recommended cancer screenings, including prioritizing calls to people at high risk for cancer, such as those with past irregular screenings or a family history of the disease.

Luckily, some health care providers are finding ways to ensure that people who need screenings can get them. For example, the Nevada Health Centers have dispatched a Mammovan, a mobile mammography vehicle, to screen women for breast cancer, according to TV station KSNV.

"Breast cancer does not take a break, no matter what is going on in the world around us," said a Nevada Health Centers spokeswoman. "To battle that, Mammovan is making mammography

screening accessible even during the COVID-19 pandemic."

The van offers screenings to women age 40 and older, but younger women with a referral from their doctor can also be screened. Clients are prescreened for COVID-19 symptoms prior to entering the van.

For related coverage, read "Screening Early for Colorectal Cancer Based on Family History Could Be Vital" and "New Mammography Study Highlights Importance of breast Cancer Screening."

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