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Cancer: A Growing Concern

20 July 2021 | Opinion | By Devin Partida is a medical and health tech writer from San Francisco, California. She also writes about medical technologies, AI and cybersecurity on ReHack.com.

The world has certainly made progress in diagnosing and treating cancer in recent years. However, that doesn't mean researchers are not still worried about rising incidence rates in some instances.

Millennials Have Elevated Risks for Some Obesity-Related Cancers

The American Cancer Society led a study that looked at 12 cancers that are more likely to develop in obese people. The results showed that millennials have a higher risk for six out of 12 cancers compared to baby boomers.

The six cancers associated with excessive body weight were: colorectal, endometrial, gallbladder, kidney, multiple myeloma and pancreatic. In some cases, the data showed that millennials categorized as obese had double the incidence rate of baby boomers.

Ahmedin Jemal, DVM Ph.D., a senior/corresponding author of the research paper, clarified that young adults have a small absolute risk for these cancers. "...The future burden of these cancers could worsen as younger cohorts age, potentially halting or reversing the progress achieved in reducing cancer mortality over the past several decades. Cancer trends in young adults often serve as a sentinel for the future disease burden in older adults, among whom most cancer occurs."

Global Breast Cancer Rates Rising, Study Reveals

The World Health Organization indicated that as of the end of 2020, 7.8 million women alive globally had been diagnosed with breast cancer in the past five years. The organization confirmed it's the world's most prevalent cancer but noted that survival rates began improving in the 1980s. Diagnostic options are getting better, too. For example, research showed 95% accuracy when combining artificial intelligence with radiologist review during screenings.

However, a study from a team at the University of Calgary examined breast cancer rates in pre- and postmenopausal women across 41 countries. It concluded that cases are rising worldwide, but differences existed depending on a patient's location. Rates of premenopausal breast cancer have gone up in higher-income nations. However, women from lower-income countries are more likely to get breast cancer diagnoses after menopause.

Additionally, the premenopausal breast cancer risk went up in 20 of 44 populations, each representing a country or ethnic group. The threat in postmenopausal groups rose in 24 of the 44 populations — most significantly in nations transitioning from a lower- to higher-income status.

The study also identified links between mortality rate and a person's country of residence. People with premenopausal breast cancer had a 47% fatality rate in less-developed places, but that declined to just 11% in more-developed nations. For postmenopausal breast cancer patients, the fatality rate was 56% in less-developed countries compared to 21% in the more-developed nations.

COVID-19 Exacerbated Cancer Risks, Studies Indicate

Many health experts have warned that it could be years before people can calculate the total burdens caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, although government officials imposed lockdowns to protect public health, the prolonged isolation some people experienced took a toll on their mental well-being. Additionally, some individuals avoided going to hospitals for urgent symptoms — such as chest pain — because they worried about catching the virus in those settings.

Research also highlights how the pandemic had an exceptional impact on cancer patients and associated services.

Oncologists Experienced Increased Distress and Burnout

A recent study explained why oncologists were at an increased risk of mental and emotional burdens during the pandemic. One aspect was the stress associated with the chance of contracting the virus.

However, the pandemic also necessitated oncologists delaying routine cancer treatments. Additionally, they were at an increased risk of experiencing compassion fatigue, particularly when managing the care of isolated cancer patients who did not have access to their usual services during the pandemic.

The research also discussed the importance of organizational actions to reduce the likelihood of burnout. Dr. Rich Parker , the chief medical officer of a data-driven health company called Arcadia Solutions, was not part of the study, but he has worthwhile insights related to team-driven care. Parker suggested having a team quality officer who oversees contractually required measures, including cancer screenings. That step could ensure specialists don't get overburdened with the number of medical images to review.

Going back to the study, the authors recommended targeting burnout at both the team and individual levels. They also mentioned how using techniques such as cognitive behavioral therapy can help oncologists cultivate self-compassion. Moreover, virtual platforms and social media campaigns can encourage providers to prioritize their well-being during the pandemic and beyond.

The Pandemic Caused Millions of Missed Cancer Screenings

As the pandemic taxed health care systems, nonessential surgeries and specialist visits got delayed or canceled. Recent research confirmed the immense impact that decision had on cancer detection.

Researchers from the University of Kansas Medical Center looked at missed cancer screenings in the United States due to the pandemic. They examined detection measures for breast, prostate and colorectal cancers, which are the top three most affected by screening procedures. The team estimated 9.4 million as the total number missed. Additionally, the investigation showed a 90% reduction in breast cancer screenings during April 2020 alone.

Dr. Ronald Chen, the study's first author, commented, "Unfortunately, by causing cancellations of appointments and cancer screenings, COVID will indirectly cause an increase in cancer deaths — another negative consequence of COVID that has not yet received much public attention."

Health care professionals know that early detection of cancer is crucial for reducing its spread and giving patients the best chance of survival. Indeed, a different study indicated that a person's fatality risk goes up by 10% for every month of delayed cancer treatment. It rose even more for certain types of postponed treatments, such as definitive radiotherapy on the head and neck. That research looked at relevant studies published from January 2000-April 2020. Thus, treatment slowdowns existed well before COVID-19.

Cancer Remains a Global Health Problem

It's undoubtedly positive that improved treatments and more accurate screening measures can improve the quality of life for people with cancer and mean they receive interventions sooner. However, the examples here show it's also necessary for providers to continue raising awareness about risk factors for cancer and what lifestyle choices people could make to minimize them.

Many people have little or no control over where they live and the quality of care in those areas. However, individuals can learn what they can do to reduce their risk of getting cancer and increase their survival chances if it does happen. That makes them feel more empowered about their health and gives providers more opportunities to improve their outcomes.