

Canadian Cancer Survivor Network News Release

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Cancer Still Waiting

A survey of Canadians waiting for diagnosis or treatment for cancer showed the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact the ability of cancer patients, caregivers, and those in the pre-diagnosis stage to access essential cancer services.

The Canadian Cancer Survivor Network (CCSN) commissioned Leger to conduct a second survey on the disruption of cancer care in Canada caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this survey follow a similar trend to the survey conducted during the first wave.

Despite the fact that cancer services have resumed after their sudden suspension, more than half (55%) of respondents reported having their appointments, tests, and treatments cancelled or postponed. Respondents said they had to wait an average of 34 days to reschedule cancelled or postponed in-person appointments, and 52 days to reschedule surgery and other procedures.

Of those who experienced delays, 36 per cent still do not have a rescheduled appointment time, and 46 per cent still do not have a rescheduled surgery or procedure time.

As we navigate the second wave of the pandemic, it is imperative that cancer care is prioritized in order to manage the backlog and prevent cancer from progressing undetected. “Cancer can’t wait. It can’t be cancelled or postponed,” said Jackie Manthorne, President and CEO of the Canadian Cancer Survivor Network. “We now know that the huge physical, psychological and financial impact of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, while also facing cancer, has put these Canadians in double jeopardy.”

Delayed care can have impacts on both physical and mental health

Concerns about receiving adequate cancer care are fueling anxieties among caregivers and patients. Seventy-two per cent of respondents experienced major impacts on their mental and emotional health. Cancer patients are more concerned than ever about their ability to receive care in a hospital or emergency room setting.

“My greatest fear is that I will have all my follow-up tests and appointments cancelled. That my cancer would come back, and I will have no access to treatment or palliative care,” said a colorectal cancer patient in Alberta. “COVID has already caused me excess pain and suffering by preventing me from getting cancer care.”

Physical health can also be impacted by delays. Early diagnosis and treatment are key to better patient outcomes. That’s why it’s important for those with cancer or suspected cancer to re-engage with the healthcare system for regular screenings, follow-up appointments, and treatments as needed.

Concerns about safety have prevented some from seeking help in hospitals

According to the CCSN survey, 14 per cent of people avoided visiting an ER and 10 per cent have avoided going to the hospital to receive cancer care. Furthermore, 13 per cent of those surveyed have hesitated to book an appointment even when they required one, mainly due to concerns about contracting COVID-19.

“My exposure to the COVID virus is heightened by being in contact with medical centres and my immune system is compromised due to the cancer and treatment. My age is a factor as well. I could be looking at the end of my life,” said a stage 1 skin cancer patient in British Columbia.

Canadians cannot afford to let this happen again!

Adequate planning should stop the sidelining of cancer care.

It is critical to plan for continued cancer care during future pandemics as well as other crises that may affect Canada, including civil unrest, environmental disasters or economic hardships. Safe and timely access to essential cancer care — including diagnostics, testing and treatment — must remain a top priority across Canada during any crisis.

About the survey

This study was a 15-minute online survey conducted between December 3rd – December 29th, 2020 and involved 1,198 Canadians diagnosed with cancer, 248 caregivers, and 192 Canadians awaiting confirmation of a diagnosis.

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