

Pandemic 'leads to slump in heart disease tests'

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Procedures to diagnose and treat heart disease fell by almost two-thirds in spring 2020 compared to 2019, a study suggested Friday, in the latest sign of the coronavirus pandemic's effect on broader healthcare systems.

The survey from the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency

(IAEA) found there was a 64 percent reduction in cardiology [diagnostic procedures](#) in March-April 2020 compared with the same period in the previous year, with "abrupt and significant" impact on services evident across all regions.

Around 718,000 cardiac diagnostic procedures were not performed in the centres surveyed in those two months due to the effects of the first wave of the pandemic, the authors say.

The survey looked at data on several procedures to evaluate [heart health](#) such as echocardiograms, angiographies and exercise stress tests.

The IAEA says the slump in the number of procedures was "mostly due to avoidance of tests by patients out of fear of possible exposure to COVID-19 in a [hospital setting](#), fewer appointment slots due to extended disinfection measures between patients, and avoidance of tests that involve aerosolization to minimize personnel exposure risks".

It added that shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) for [medical staff](#) were also reported in 22 percent of centres, adding to the difficulty of carrying out procedures.

The study is based on responses from over 900 institutions in 108 countries.

It showed that the procedures most impacted included lengthier ones and those where the risk of exposure to coronavirus infections could increase.

Exercise stress tests, for example, where droplets of sweat and saliva are likely to be released in the air, were the most disrupted, dropping by 78 percent.

In the four low-income countries, included the survey, the fall in procedures was even steeper, at 81 percent.

Heart disease has been the world's leading cause of death for the last 20 years.

In December the World Health Organization said that it was "killing more people than ever before", with nine million fatalities in 2019—up by two million since 2000.

"We don't want people with heart diseases to miss out on timely diagnosis and treatment or to develop serious life-threatening complications that could have been avoided," said co-author of the study Dr. Michelle Williams from the University of Edinburgh.

Last year, the IAEA also warned about the adverse impact of the pandemic on nuclear medicine services for cancer care.

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