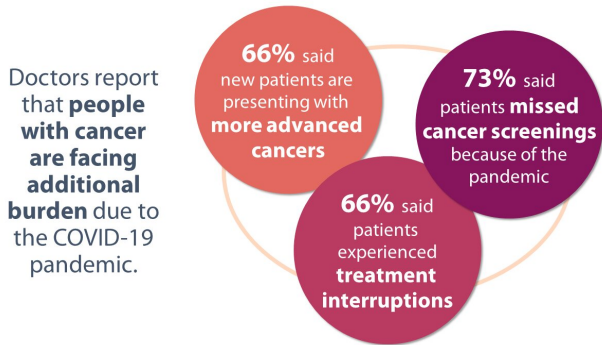


COVID-19 pandemic has led to more advanced-stage cancer diagnoses, physician survey finds

30 March 2021



ASTRO SURVEY: COVID-19 & RADIATION ONCOLOGY • MEDIA BRIEFING 3/30/21

One year into the COVID-19 pandemic, doctors who treat people with cancer are seeing the harmful effects of the pandemic on their patients, according to a national survey of radiation oncologists. Credit: American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO)

Doctors who oversee cancer clinics say that new patients are arriving for treatment with more advanced disease than before the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a new survey from the American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO). The national survey of radiation therapy practice leaders fielded this winter also indicates that treatment postponements and deferrals that were common a year ago have largely subsided and that clinics continue to use a variety of enhanced safety measures to protect their patients and staff.

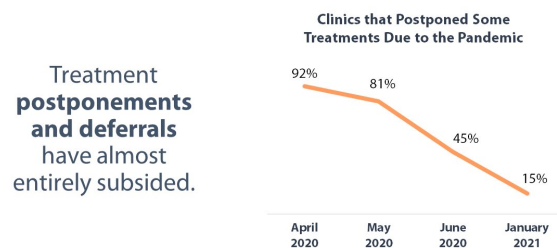
"One year into the COVID-19 [pandemic](#), we already see the consequences of pandemic-driven drops in [cancer screening](#) and diagnostics," said Thomas J. Eichler, MD, FASTRO, Chair of the ASTRO Board of Directors.

Two-thirds of the radiation oncologists (66%) said new patients are presenting with more advanced-

stage cancers. Nearly three-fourths (73%) said physicians in their practice are noticing that patients are not receiving [cancer](#) screenings, and many also said existing patients experienced an interruption in their radiation treatment due to the pandemic (66%).

"Because the pandemic and cancer cause disproportionately more harm for Black and other medically underserved populations, these rates may be even higher for some vulnerable communities," added Dr. Eichler.

Enhanced safety protocols remain widespread at radiation therapy clinics. Masking for patients and staff (99%), social distancing in the clinic (100%) and screening patients and staff for COVID-19 exposure (95%) are nearly universal. Increased sterilization (93%), face shields for staff during procedures (80%) and no-visitor policies (73%) are also common.



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Most clinics are no longer deferring or postponing radiation treatments, according to a national survey of radiation oncologists. Credit: American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO)

"Safety is at the core of radiation oncology, and clinics were ready to adapt quickly and ramp up protective measures that keep their staff and patients safe from COVID-19 exposure," said Dr. Eichler.

The survey also found that clinics have largely stopped deferring or postponing radiation treatments. Only 15% reported postponing treatment in January/February 2021, compared to 92% in April 2020. Similarly, 12% reported deferring any new patient visits in 2021, compared to 75% in the early weeks of the pandemic.

Four in 10 practices still reported difficulty accessing [personal protective equipment](#), medical-grade hand sanitizer or other critical supplies in the initial months of 2021. More alarmingly, many physicians said that COVID-19 vaccination efforts at their practice were limited by access to the vaccine (53%), and by hesitation to receive the vaccine among staff (59%) and patients (52%). The high rates of hesitancy echo findings that more than half of frontline health care workers in the U.S. were unvaccinated as of early March 2021.

ASTRO recently joined a coalition led by the American Cancer Society and National Comprehensive Cancer Network to encourage the American public to resume cancer screening and treatment, emphasizing that cancer won't wait until the pandemic ends. ASTRO also updated its COVID-19 clinical guidance to include support for COVID-19 vaccination for people receiving radiation therapy, as long as the individual does not have increased risk of a reaction to the vaccine. Patients are encouraged to consult with their radiation oncologist regarding timing and location of the injection.

Enhanced safety protocols remain widespread at radiation therapy clinics.

100%	Social distancing in the clinic
99%	Staff routinely wear masks
98%	Patients routinely wear masks
97%	Staff who show symptoms are tested
94%	Patients are screened at the door
93%	Increased clinic sterilization
80%	Staff wear face shields for treatments
73%	Visitors are not allowed

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Enhanced safety protocols in radiation therapy clinics remain widespread, according to a national survey of radiation oncologists. Credit: American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO)

Additional Survey Findings

The pandemic is not affecting clinics equally. Radiation oncologists at community-based private practices were more likely to report seeing advanced-stage cancers among their patients, compared to those at university-affiliated clinics. PPE shortages and pandemic-related treatment interruptions were also more common at private practices. Differences emerged regarding the COVID-19 vaccine, as well. Both vaccine access and vaccine hesitation were more problematic barriers for clinics located outside of major metropolitan areas (i.e., population

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