How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected numbers of newly identified cancer patients?

**Background**
Decreases in new cancer diagnoses have been reported from several European countries. In the United States, the CDC suggested postponing preventive care, including cancer screenings, which may have had a similar effect.

**Results**
Numbers of newly identified cancer patients have dramatically decreased. Planning for the consequences of delayed diagnoses may be warranted.
Background

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicated that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, cancer screening and other prevention services should be postponed unless the risks outweighed the benefits.¹
- Such guidance has affected diagnosis and treatment rates of life-threatening conditions. For example, the number of patients being treated for myocardial infarction decreased 38%.²
- If cancer screening and the resulting diagnoses also decreased, cancers would likely be identified at more advanced stages and have poorer outcomes. Determining if such a decrease occurred may help healthcare providers plan for these situations.

Objective: In this study, investigators examined whether the number of newly identified cancer patients changed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

- In this cross-sectional study, patients were included if they were tested at Quest Diagnostics and their ordering physician assigned ICD-10 codes associated with any of 6 cancer types: breast, colorectal, lung, pancreatic, gastric, and esophageal.
- The mean weekly number of newly identified patients was determined for the baseline period (January 6, 2019-February 29, 2020). Weekly numbers for the pandemic period (March 1, 2020-April 18, 2020) were compared to baseline.
- The mean age and sex distribution of patients diagnosed with cancer during the baseline period and pandemic period were compared.

Results

- During the baseline period, the mean weekly number of all newly identified cancer patients was 4,310.
- During the pandemic period studied, the weekly number of all newly identified cancer patients was 2,310 in week 7 (week beginning April 12), 46% lower than baseline.
- Declines were seen in all cancer types in week 7, ranging from 25% to 52% (P<.05).
- The mean age of patients with breast, colorectal, lung, and pancreatic cancers was lower during the pandemic period compared to baseline (P<.05).

Conclusions

- Fewer new cancer patients were identified during the COVID-19 pandemic period compared to normal baseline.
- Urgent actions will need to be taken to avoid a potential increase in cancer deaths in the United States due to delayed diagnoses.

References