

Challenges that cancer patients face during the outbreak of waves of the COVID-19 disease

Dear Editor,

Vulnerable groups at risk of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) are considered cancer patients who were susceptible to this disease, especially patients with underlying diseases, undergoing chemotherapy/radiotherapy, receiving immunotherapy/immunosuppressive drugs/antibodies, and receiving bone marrow or stem cell transplant.^[1,2] Statistics has shown that centers faced challenges in providing usual cancer care, and up to 80% of cancer patients in several centers had exposure to possible injury.^[2] Therefore, cancer patients may be at risk of contracting a severe form of COVID-19, and one out of three cancer patients is negatively affected by COVID-19 in terms of clinical care and treatment because COVID-19 is significantly changing the delivery of hospital and out-patient care.^[3] Cancer patients have been found to feel lonely and are at risk of anxiety, depression, and COVID-19-related fears during the pandemic. In fact, although the experts have emphasized the importance of maintaining the emotional health of cancer patients during the pandemic, this support has been given the lowest priority.^[4,5] Because the duration of the pandemic and the increase in the waves of COVID-19 are uncertain, we have provided suggestions to reduce challenges that face cancer patients:

- Strategies to reduce the risk of face-to-face exposure in cancer patients should be considered; therefore, online visits should be prioritized and chemotherapy or surgery for people with low-risk cancers can be delayed during rising waves of COVID-19.
- WHO recommendations such as wearing a mask, washing hands, maintaining a distance of 2 feet from other people, not attending unnecessary gatherings, and so on should be prioritized for cancer patients.
- Cancer patients should inject reminder doses of the vaccine as soon as possible with the discretion of their doctor.
- Nurses and medical staff should pay attention to follow all necessary measures to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 from them to patients.
- Protective approaches and changes in the personal space of patients should be prioritized; during the administration of chemotherapy, treatment beds or chairs should be placed with enough space (1.5 meters) apart to prevent close contact between patients and people.
- The family of patients who are infected or suspected of having COVID-19 should follow the WHO

recommendations regarding quarantine and inform their care center of any quarantine requirements. On one side, social non-compliance in masking and physical distancing can be distressing for cancer patients, and healthcare systems must prioritize accurate messages for COVID-19 precautions and ensure staff and client compliance; on the other side, social support in cancer patients can increase both greater resilience and reduced anxious pre-occupation.

- All centers should educate patients and their families about the symptoms of COVID-19, a range of unmet informational needs, and new variants because recommendations are likely to change frequently.
- Although limiting the presence of patients' companions is stressful, it may be critical in the confined spaces of the chemotherapy suite. In such cases, it is suggested to use portable technology such as smartphones or iPads to be lent to companions during the treatment session to support the patient.
- If cancer patients become infected with COVID-19, especially older patients and those with underlying disease, faster treatment and closer monitoring during the recovery period should be considered. In this situation, cancer patients can communicate with their doctor through social media to advance treatment and avoid being in risky situations because of use of social media to promote health, well-being, and quality of life among cancer patients during public health crises, especially those with underlying disease.

The bitter truth is that the pandemic and periodic increase in waves with new variants have caused cancer patients to struggle with various challenges and may disproportionately affect the overall well-being of patients, which may lead to unintended long-term consequences. Therefore, following the above suggestions can be a suitable solution to avoid many of these challenges.

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Conflicts of interest

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