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## Physicians urge cancer screening, care to avoid second health crisis

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Health care leaders are concerned that delaying cancer screening and care during the pandemic could contribute to another health crisis.

Many patients are putting off preventive services and screenings, such as mammographies and colonoscopies, for fear of potential exposure to Covid-19. A [recent survey](#) by the American Cancer Society found that 50% of cancer patients and survivors reported some impact to their care as a result of the pandemic.

Dr. Diane Reidy-Lagunes, medical oncologist and associate deputy physician-in-chief of Memorial Sloan Kettering's regional care network, fears undiagnosed cases are looming.

During the height of the pandemic, clinicians advocated for staying at home to help flatten the curve, Reidy-Lagunes said. But now it's important that patients know MSK and other health care providers are open, have put in place

precautionary measures to ensure patient safety and can provide critical services to catch cancer early for better outcomes.

She pointed to a recent study from the U.K. that predicted a significant reduction in cancer care provided during the pandemic will **result in 34,000 excess deaths** in the U.S.

The message to patients is, "Let's get back to the screenings," that are so important for early detection, Reidy-Lagunes said.

In terms of ongoing care, MSK has put into place Covid-19 screening for existing patients and staff. Social distancing is being enforced, including at nursing and infusion stations for chemotherapy and other treatments.

For cancer patients who have also tested positive for the virus, MSK has developed a virtual monitoring team to help keep an eye on their condition as they isolate at home, she said. Overall, telehealth visits have increased 2,000% in recent months.

Dr. Charles Simone, chief medical officer of the New York Proton Center, said there was concern over the vulnerability of cancer patients even before Covid-19 reached the city.

The center, which specializes in an advanced form of radiation treatment, implemented a bevy of safety protocols by the beginning of March. That included prohibiting visitors, except for one per patient in need of special assistance, and arranging for transportation options that reduce the need for long rides on public transit.

"If there are delays in getting treatment, patients can have worse outcomes," Simone said. "Cancer is one of the most time-sensitive diseases."

A delay of one or two months is manageable, he said, but four, six or nine months can be a much different situation. That is particularly true of lung and gynecologic cancers, and those of the head and neck, among other high-risk forms.

Simone is concerned about the screenings and regular visits with primary care physicians that are being put off.

Last month physician leaders at CareMount Medical told *Crain's* they too are concerned about people **putting off general medical appointments** and procedures during the pandemic.

Dr. Scott Hayworth, president and CEO, reiterated the importance of staying up to date on necessary preventive health screenings.

"Cancer screening is very, very important," Hayworth said. "I'm an OB-GYN by training, and right now I'm scared that we're going to miss ovarian cancers and endometrial cancers."

Reidy-Lagunes of MSK concurred.

"Many of us are very worried," she said. —Jennifer Henderson