

Fact Sheet on Breast Cancer and the COVID-19 Virus

Studies on the Impact of COVID-19 on Breast Cancer Patients

Studies on breast cancer and the COVID-19 virus are limited but here is some of what we know so far:

- One of the [earliest studies](#) on the COVID-19 virus showed that cancer patients, older individuals and those with comorbidities were at a higher risk of complications.
- [Findings](#) released near the end of July by the COVID-19 & Cancer Consortium, showed that cancer patients who contract COVID-19 die at a rate 3 times higher than non-cancer COVID-19 patients. Their [first findings](#) included around 1,000 patients and showed a mortality rate of 13%, while this second study included a little over 2,000 patients and showed a mortality rate of 16%.
- Cancer patients don't all have the same risk level. Risk level can be impacted by the [stage of cancer and type of cancer treatment](#) as well as the [type of cancer](#), with early-stage breast cancer patients being identified as having a lower risk of complications when compared to other types of cancers.
- A [study](#) that looked at the impact of time between diagnosis and treatment has shown that a delay between diagnosis to surgical treatment does not lower the overall survival of women with early-stage breast cancer. Similarly, there was no survival decrease with operative delays among women with ER+ early-stage breast cancer who received neoadjuvant endocrine therapy.

Impact of Cancer Treatments on Risk of Infection

It is natural to have concerns about the impact of your treatment regimen on your immune system and your risk of infection. Your health care team is carefully trying to balance managing your treatment regimen and lowering your risk of infection while striving to ensure you receive optimal treatment in a safe approach.

The reason that cancer patients have been [identified as high-risk](#) is because they are immunocompromised. It is important to remember that while certain cancers and treatments can contribute to weakened immune systems, there is no data suggesting that all cancer treatments increase your risk of getting COVID-19. Here are some of the factors that can impact your immune system if you are on some of the more common cancer treatments:

Chemotherapy

Impact on your immune system depends on:

- Type and stage of cancer
- Chemo drugs that are used
- Dose and frequency of that chemo is administered
- Age of patient
- Eating habits
- Other cancer treatments

Radiation

Impact on your immune system depends on:

- Dose and frequency that radiation is administered
- Location and amount of body being treated
- Other cancer treatments

Surgery

Impact on your immune system depends on:

- Length of hospital stay
- How long and extensive the procedure was
- Amount of bleeding during surgery
- Eating habits
- Other cancer treatments
- Other comorbidities

For more details and how other cancer treatments impact the immune system, read our blog on this topic: [Impact of Your Cancer Treatment and Management on Your Immune System](#)

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Staying in Contact with Your Cancer Care Team

Regardless of the treatment that you are receiving, it is advisable to connect with your cancer care team about whether adjustments to your treatment regimen are appropriate or necessary. It's also very important to connect with your health care provider if you notice changes in your health or are experiencing serious side effects from treatment. Arrangements may be made to have a virtual appointment, or if an in-person appointment is required, doctor's offices, cancer centres, and centres for diagnostic imaging are taking all the necessary precautions to ensure the safety of patients.

It is important to ensure your cancer care is continuing as scheduled. Cancer currently presents a higher overall risk to your health and quality of life, in comparison to COVID-19.

Some specific [questions to ask your team](#) may include:

- Do the benefits of delaying treatment outweigh the risks?
- How long can I safely delay treatment?
- Are my scheduled scans or tests important or can they be delayed? (Monitoring cancer is critical, to ensure your treatment's effectiveness and safety, but some screening or surveillance tests can be safely delayed.)
- Would treatment at a different hospital with fewer COVID-19 patients be safer?
- What are some alternatives to treatment in a hospital?
- What symptoms would warrant immediate or emergency treatment?

COVID-19 Resources for Breast Cancer Patients

[COVID-19 Resources and Updates](#) from CBCN
[Cancer and COVID19 \(novel coronavirus\)](#) from CCS
[Common Questions About the New Coronavirus Outbreak](#) from ACS

Concerns About Returning to Work

With most businesses and services reopened or in the process of reopening, most Canadians have returned to work. As a breast cancer patient, you may be worried about what this means for your risk. It's important to make sure that your employer has taken steps to ensure that the workplace is safe to return to. A few [questions to ask your employer](#) to assess this are:

- What safety measures have been put in place?
- What physical distancing measures are in place?
- What PPE (personal protection equipment) will be provided or am I to provide these myself?
- How many people (co-workers and the public) can I expect to come in contact with each day?
- Can there be accommodations made to my work such as doing telework, working away from the general public etc.?

If you believe that your workplace is unsafe, you have a [right to refuse unsafe work](#).

If accommodations can't be made to you work or you do not feel comfortable returning, you can look into accessing "[Other Leave With Pay \(699\)](#)". You can also look into taking [paid sick leave](#), [unpaid job-protected leave](#) or [employment insurance \(EI\)](#) due to sickness. Recent changes have been made to EI in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that has widened the net of who may be eligible.

Read more about your rights as an employee as it relates to COVID-19 from [The Government of Canada](#) and from [Public Service Alliance of Canada](#).