

COVID's Impact on Cancer Diagnosis



While there are studies underway to characterize the direct effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the care of patients with cancer, there have been relatively few quantitative reports of the impact that efforts to control the pandemic have had on the normal course of cancer diagnosis and treatment encounters. However, a multi-center research team led by **Jack London, PhD**, research professor emeritus of cancer biology, and **Christopher McNair, PhD**, associate director for data science at Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center and assistant professor of cancer biology, is studying that now. They have used encounter data from 20 healthcare institutions to compare numbers of cancer-related patient encounters in early 2019 to those occurring between January and April 2020, as COVID-19 became a pandemic.

The study considered a variety of patient cohorts including: those with existing cancer; those with new incidence of disease; those with specific types of cancer; and those simply undergoing screenings. "We found a significant decline in numbers of patient encounters in the early-COVID period, across the groups

studied," says Dr. McNair, "notably including those with new incidence of cancer." Of the cancer types analyzed, lung, colorectal and hematologic cancer cohorts exhibited decreases in patient encounters roughly averaging 39 percent—while decreases for breast cancer, prostate cancer and melanoma ranged from almost 48 percent to nearly 52 percent. In addition, cancer screenings declined drastically, with breast and colorectal cancer screenings dropping by well over 80 percent.

"The steep decreases in cancer screening, and patients with new incidences of cancer suggest the possibility of a notable increase in patients with later-stage cancer being seen initially in the future," Dr. London says. "We also can expect an increased demand for cancer screening procedures as delayed tests are rescheduled."

The researchers are currently analyzing the most recent available data from an expanded network of institutions and are working to understand the continuing effects of the pandemic on cancer diagnosis and treatment encounters. ■

