How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected numbers of newly diagnosed cancers?

**Background**

Numbers of newly diagnosed cancers sharply declined in the first 2 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether these numbers have recovered over the first year of the pandemic has not been reported.

**Results**

![Decreases in Newly Diagnosed Cancers](image)

After a partial rebound, the number of newly diagnosed cancers decreased again in the third period of the study.

Newly diagnosed cancers remained well below baseline values a year into the pandemic, suggesting that many cancers remain undiagnosed.


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Article Title: Changes in Newly Identified Cancer Among US Patients From Before COVID-19 Through the First Full Year of the Pandemic

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Background

- In the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released guidance that cancer screening and other prevention services be postponed.
- In a previous nationwide study, the investigators reported that the weekly number of 6 types of cancer diagnoses declined by nearly 50% during March 1 to April 18, 2020, compared to the pre-pandemic period.¹
- **Objective:** This updated analysis examined changes in numbers of newly diagnosed cancers through March of 2021.

Methods

- In this cross-sectional study, patients were included if they (1) were tested at Quest Diagnostics for any cause from January 2019 through March of 2021; (2) were assigned an ICD-10 code for any of 8 newly diagnosed cancer types (breast, colorectal, lung, pancreatic, cervical, gastric, esophageal, prostate); and (3) had no ICD-10 entries for the same cancer type since January 2018.
- The mean monthly number of newly diagnosed cancers during each pandemic period was compared to that of the pre-pandemic period:
  - Pre-pandemic period: January 2019–February 2020
  - 3 pandemic periods: March–May 2020, June–October 2020, and November 2020–March 2021

Results

- Mean monthly numbers of newly diagnosed cancers across periods are summarized below:
  - March–May 2020, 1st pandemic period: 22,748 (29.8% decrease from baseline)
  - June–October 2020, 2nd pandemic period: 29,304 (9.6% decrease from baseline)
  - November 2020–March 2021, 3rd pandemic period: 26,204 (19.1% decrease from baseline)
- Compared to pre-pandemic values, the percent decrease in the mean monthly numbers of newly diagnosed cancers was statistically significant for all cancer types during the 1st and 3rd pandemic periods (all \(P<0.1\); the percent decrease in the 2nd period did not reach statistical significance, except for prostate cancer.

Conclusions

- Although the initial sharp decline in new cancer diagnoses was followed by a partial rebound in the second pandemic period, cancer diagnoses declined again in the third period. The finding that cancer diagnoses have not yet returned to pre-pandemic values suggests that a substantial number of cancers remain undiagnosed.
- Careful planning, which may include strengthened clinical telehealth offerings, is needed to address outcomes related to delayed or undiagnosed cancers.

Reference