

PAHO urges diagnosis and treatment of cancer, the 2nd leading cause of death in the Americas

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused life-threatening disruptions in cancer services. Four million new cases and about 1.4 million deaths were reported that year.

WASHINGTON, D.C., February 2, 2021 (PAHO) On the eve of Feb. 4 World Cancer Day, Pan American Health Organization Director Carissa F. Etienne called for ensuring diagnosis and treatment of cancer in the Americas, where services have been seriously disrupted during the COVID19 pandemic.

"We must not forget other grave illnesses while we combat COVID-19," Etienne said. "We must fight the pandemic while continuing to make advances against other diseases, particularly cancer. For cancer patients, lack of diagnoses, treatments, and medications can be deadly," she remarked.

In the Americas, cancer is the second leading cause of death, with an estimated 4 million people newly diagnosed in 2020. An estimated 1.4 million people died from cancer in 2020. And approximately 57% of new cancer cases and 47% of cancer deaths occurred in people 69 years of age or younger, in the prime of their lives. Among men, prostate, lung and colorectal cancers are most common whereas among women, breast, lung and colorectal cancers are most common.

Pandemic-related disruptions to cancer services arose due to multiple causes, according to a [PAHO/WHO survey of noncommunicable diseases \(NCDs\), including cancer, in seven countries in the Americas](#). They resulted from cancellation of elective medical procedures, closure of services, reduction in demand due to lockdowns, and the need to channel resources into COVID-19.

In addition, some cancer patients have been reluctant to show up for office visits or go to hospitals for treatment where COVID-19 patients may also be receiving care. Cancer patients are at increased risk of developing the most serious and potentially fatal forms of COVID-19.

"We must ensure that people who are already sick with cancer do not miss life-saving diagnosis and treatment because of the pandemic," said Anselm Hennis, director of PAHO's Department of Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health. "There are tools for prevention, diagnosis, and treatment that can show us how to achieve this."

PAHO/WHO [provides guidance](#) on how to adapt services for cancer patients amid the pandemic:

- Prioritize treatments for cancer patients, taking into consideration the safest and most effective interventions, the speed at which the cancer is progressing, and the effects of delayed treatment on clinical outcomes and quality of life.
- Minimize the number of in-person visits to health centers, especially in areas where there may be more patients with suspected COVID-19.
- Lower risk of exposure by providing services and clinical trials at alternate health care facilities.
- Provide follow-up counseling, psychological support, or palliative care by telephone or remotely.
- Facilitate home delivery of drugs and in-home testing and sampling.
- Move practitioners' offices to locations with lower risk of exposure.
- Delay personalized follow-up visits for several months when feasible, for example, when patients have completed treatment, have a good prognosis, and can be seen in telehealth consultations.

A call for a world without cancer

World Cancer Day works to save millions of lives each year by raising awareness and education about cancer and by calling on governments and people around the world to take action against the disease.

From 2019 through 2021, the theme of World Cancer Day is "I am, and I will" – a collective call to action to reduce the global impact of cancer. This global day invites people to express who they are and what actions they will take to create a world without cancer.

Between one-third to one-half of cancer cases could be prevented by reducing risk factors such as tobacco use, harmful use of alcohol, unhealthy diet, and physical inactivity. The human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine also prevents cervical cancer.

"Cancer should never be a death sentence, even during a pandemic," Dr. Hennis said.

LINKS

Rapid Assessment of service delivery for NCDs during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Americas, 4 June 2020: <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/52250>

Informe de la evaluación rápida de la prestación de servicios para

enfermedades no transmisibles durante la pandemia de COVID-19 en las Américas: <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/52283>

Considerations for the Reorganization of Cancer Services during the COVID-19 Pandemic, 26 May 2020: <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/52263>

Consideraciones para la reorganización de los servicios oncológicos durante la pandemia de COVID-19, 26 de mayo del 2020: <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/52218>

World Cancer Day 2021: <https://www.paho.org/en/campaigns/world-cancer-day-2021-i-am-and-i-will>

Día Mundial contra el Cáncer: <https://www.paho.org/es/campanas/dia-mundial-contra-cancer-2021-yo-soy-voy>

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The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) works with the countries of the Americas to improve the health and quality of life of its population. Founded in 1902, it is the world's oldest international public health agency. It serves as the Regional Office of WHO for the Americas and is the specialized health agency of the Inter-American system.