

Baylor
College of
Medicine

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**DIRECTOR'S UPDATE
ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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Update on the COVID-19 Pandemic and How It Affects Our Patients

Facts and Figures

In a previous communication we described the SARS-COV-2 virus that has caused the COVID-19 pandemic and explained that some cancer patients may be more susceptible to more severe infections because of the treatment they are receiving or the type of cancer they have. Methods that patients can use to reduce their risk of infection with this highly contagious virus were also described. Now that we have 3 months of experience with the pandemic it's time to review where we are today nationally, regionally, and in the Texas Medical Center, and to emphasize that it is very safe for our patients to return to the Cancer Center for their medical care.

Although the pandemic is now better controlled in the previously "hot" areas like New York City, New Orleans and Seattle, where the first cases were observed, it is by no means over. But thanks to the preventive actions that were put in place like social distancing, wearing masks, staying home except for essential trips to the store, and frequent hand washing, the rate of infection has been declining in many areas of the country. Unfortunately there are some areas, like the state of Texas, where the infection rate and number of deaths continued to rise until very recently. This statistic is partly due to more frequent testing, if you look for it you will find it in asymptomatic people, partly due to clusters in areas like Amarillo where another meat processing plant was the source, and partly due to lessening restrictions too soon or people not following the recommended guidelines.

The good news is that the situation in Houston is improving. Although the number of new cases has been stable for the past 3-4 weeks at 200 new cases per day, again in part due to more testing, the number of hospitalizations and deaths has declined. On May 18 at Baylor St. Luke's Medical Center Hospital there were only 13 patients with proven infection, 10 in the ICU, and 6 with suspected infection, down significantly from the peak 6 weeks ago. More than 650 medical staff taking care of these patients in the hospital have been tested for the virus and only 2 of them acquired the infection. At the BSLMC outpatient center on the McNair campus no infections have been identified in doctors, staff or patients. If you follow guidelines the chance of infection is low. Thus, keeping appointments to see your physician or for important diagnostic tests in the Cancer Center is very safe indeed.

Precautions for Patients Coming to the DLCCCC

The reasons for the outstanding safety record in the outpatient Cancer Center on the McNair campus are several. The Baylor community of doctors, nurses and staff have been following all of the guidelines. Patients are also doing a great job following the guidelines, especially those with a cancer diagnosis, and, if you follow them, your chances of infection are very small even if you venture out of your home for shopping or other activities. In addition, everyone entering the BSLMC outpatient building, doctors, nurses, staff, patients, and visitors, are screened for symptoms and their temperature taken, and they are asked to use hand sanitizer upon entry. Masks (face covers) are required for everyone.

Unfortunately there is concern by cancer doctors and leaders at the National Cancer Institute that the mortality from cancer might go up in the near future after several years of decline. Why? Patients are fearful of going to their doctor thinking that they are more likely to be exposed to the SARs-COV-2 virus in a medical facility. Consequently, they are delaying cancer screening procedures like mammograms, colonoscopies, gynecologic

exams, physician exams, or evaluation of new symptoms. To provide a cushion of safety, hospitals many of which were initially overwhelmed by the number of COVID-19 patients, also temporarily delayed non-emergent cancer surgery and certain other medical procedures. However, if important diagnostic tests or surgery are delayed too long survival could be adversely impacted. The DLDOCC delayed some of these procedures for a short time but now we are opening up cancer screening, cancer surgery, diagnostic tests, and face to face visits when necessary because our data show that it is safe to proceed. Telehealth patient visits will continue to be offered for patients who don't need to have an exam or be seen in person. But, it is now clear that patients can feel very safe coming to the clinic or hospital for these procedures, and these visits should not be delayed because of fear of exposure to the virus.

What Should Patients Do Now?

The threat of this infection will be with us for a long time, until we have an effective and safe vaccine or curative treatment. Continue to follow the guidelines you are well aware of.

- Because social distancing, wearing masks, and frequent hand washing have now been proven to work to reduce the chance of infection. These should be continued even as state regulators lessen restrictions on businesses and other activities.
- Use common sense. Riding on an elevator with someone who is not wearing a mask or not wearing a mask yourself is not advisable. Droplets or aerosols expelled by coughing, sneezing or even talking can linger in a closed space like an elevator with no ventilation for many minutes exposing other riders to the virus.
- Use good judgment when thinking about going to a restaurant, hair stylist, or other activity that will expose you to others who may not be following the guidelines as strictly as you.
- Stay home if you feel sick. We have learned that infection with this virus can present in a myriad of ways from no symptoms at all to minor complaints like a runny nose, headache, diarrhea, fever, sore throat or mild cough. If you think you might have an infection stay home, don't contaminate others, and call your doctor.
- Everyone understands that isolation from loved ones, friends or others is a difficult problem we have all encountered, and getting out more is a human need. Do it wisely and even though wearing a mask is somewhat inconvenient or uncomfortable do it anyway to protect others and yourself. Pretend you have the infection even if you don't think you do to avoid transmitting it others inadvertently; and, in public assume that the next person you pass may have an asymptomatic infection and not know it. That person could transmit it to you.
- Finally, don't be afraid to come to the clinic for your oncology visit, cancer screening, or diagnostic tests. Delaying important medical visits could be more detrimental to your health than the exceedingly low risk of acquiring the infection in the doctor's office.

Helpful Resources

Below are helpful references for better understanding of COVID-19. Also, stress caused by the pandemic and its effects on quality of life is becoming a common problem. Below is a link on how to better cope at this time of considerable stress that might be helpful.

- <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/viswanathlab/health-and-well-being/>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>

Conclusion

The current situation we find ourselves in will not last forever. Some countries like Taiwan, despite its close proximity to mainland China, have managed the epidemic well and have a total of only deaths. If we can continue to follow guidelines while we also loosen some restrictions, we can keep the virus under control until a vaccine or treatment are available. If you have questions contact your oncologist or primary care physician.