

- Virus

Cancer patients, those on chemotherapy have worse COVID -19 prognosis

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People with cancer who contract COVID-19 are nearly five times more likely to die from the infection than those without cancer, a study published Thursday by JAMA Oncology found.

In addition, cancer patients who have received treatment for the disease within the past three months have a 20 percent risk for hospitalization and nearly 75 percent higher risk for death following coronavirus infection than people without cancer, the data showed.

Recent chemotherapy increases risk for death from COVID-19 by 84 percent, likely due to the weakened immunity brought on by radiation treatment or chemotherapy for cancer, according to the researchers.

Conversely, cancer patients who have not undergone treatment for the disease within the past three months have a nearly 40 percent lower risk for needing mechanical ventilation for breathing support following COVID-19 infection than those without cancer, they said.

Patients who have not been treated for cancer within three months of testing positive for COVID-19 also have a 7 percent lower risk for death compared with patients who do not have cancer, though it is unclear why.

“We found that patients with cancer who were being treated with chemotherapy or radiation therapy within three months of COVID-19 diagnosis had an increased risk of hospitalization, intensive care unit stay and death,” study co-author Dr. Sharon Giordano told UPI in an email.

“In contrast, patients with cancer who were not recently treated did not have worse outcomes than people without cancer,” said Giordano, chair of Health Services Research at The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center.

There are about 16 million cancer survivors in the United States, according to the National Cancer Institute.

People with cancer as well as various chronic illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease are at increased risk for serious illness from COVID-19 due to the effects of these underlying health problems on their immune systems, research suggests.

As a result, they have been given priority for COVID-19 vaccination, and booster shots have been recommended to increase protection against infection.

For this study, the researchers analyzed data on nearly 510,000 adults who tested positive for the virus in 2020, more than 14,000 of whom had cancer.

Of the cancer patients in the study population, about 30 percent had received treatment for the disease within three months of being diagnosed with COVID-19, while the rest had not.