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COVID-19 fear increases Indiaâ??s cancer burden by 40%

09 December 2020 | News

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The fear of contracting COVID-19 has kept away from visiting hospitals. Consequently timely diagnosis and care management of chronic diseases like cancer has seen a massive decline. Since March when COVID-19 struck, cancer care and diagnosis has been a challenge for two reasons: existing cancer patients are extremely vulnerable to severe effects of COVID-19 and patients who are vulnerable to the disease have delayed consulting the medical practionier leading to delayed detection and diagnosis. As a result, all this has led to patients reaching hospital at advanced stages of the disease.

Most patients reporting advanced stages of cancer are over 60 years of age who mostly suffer from co-morbidities like diabetes, cardiac ailments and hypertension and hence are the most apprehensive to step out of homes or seek doctors consultation.

Dr SM Shuaib Zaidi, Senior Consultant, Surgical Oncology, Indraprastha Apollo Hospitals, New Delhi, said “In India, 50-60 per cent of patients seek medical treatment in the advanced stages due to lack of awareness and timely screening. With the current pandemic, this percentage has gone up by at least 40% due to COVID fear. In the month of September- October, we have seen an upsurge in patients being diagnosed with stage 2 and stage 3 cancer, some of them with bleak chances of recovery.

Dr Ramesh Sarin, Senior Consultant, Surgical Oncology, Indraprastha Apollo Hospitals, New Delhi, said, “What we were able to do before COVID-19 as preventive measures for early detection of cancer in terms of screenings for breast cancer, cervical cancer, prostate cancer, head and neck cancers, has declined. In the month of October 7 out of 10 patients have missed their radiation sessions. This puts the patients under threat of spread of cancer and consequent life threatening complications.”