

COVID-19 & Cancer Care

April 2020

Background

Individuals living with cancer are particularly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is well documented that cancer patients undergoing treatments, particularly chemotherapy and radiotherapy, are susceptible to infections and we know that COVID-19 is particularly difficult on individuals who are [immunocompromised and/or vulnerable](#). People undergoing treatment for cancer are not more likely to contract COVID-19; however, they are at higher risk of suffering serious outcomes if infected.

If a cancer patient becomes infected with COVID-19, their cancer treatments may be suspended, delayed or modified. Some cancer patients have been moved from in-patient settings to home settings, where virtual/telehealth options are then utilized, to protect them from COVID-19. Others may find learn that their oncology consultations or follow-up management will be done virtually rather than in person. While these adjustments may offer important protection from COVID-19, in some instances they may alter the course of treatment for a cancer patient and could impact their health outcomes. Thus, all of these changes hold the potential to heighten patient and family anxiety and the need for psychosocial support.

A critical part of protecting cancer patients is to ensure oncology healthcare providers have access to proper personal protective equipment (PPE). It is also essential for healthcare providers to understand and consistently engage in appropriate technique for donning (putting on) and doffing (removing) PPE to mitigate the risk of infection for themselves and others. As such, ensuring that nursing staff work with proper levels of PPE and maintain adherence to protocol, will help to protect both nurses and patients.

Nurses are at the heart of cancer care and their patients/clients and family members are likely to have many questions about their treatment and care during this time. As nursing has always been at the forefront of healthcare during pandemics, nurses are well positioned to provide the needed support to cancer patients and families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nurses have the skills, expertise and knowledge, in close collaboration with their interdisciplinary colleagues, to answer critical questions for patients, mitigate concerns and provide potentially life-saving information and action for people undergoing cancer treatment and care.

Now more than ever, nursing expertise is needed to help assess for distress (e.g., anxiety, depression, and anticipatory grief) and psychological status to support cancer patients in addressing their mental health and well-being. From a wider systems and policy perspective, it is imperative that nurses are included in policy and health-system decision making about cancer care and COVID-19 related responses for this particularly vulnerable population. This is an opportunity for nursing to demonstrate the distinct value and impact that nurses bring to cancer care above and beyond the delivery of treatment. Nurses are critical to the effective dissemination of information to cancer patients, families and interdisciplinary care teams, and play a pivotal role in the provision and coordination of care across the cancer care trajectory.

Key Messages

- Nurses working in cancer care have the knowledge and expertise to answer patient/client questions about cancer care and treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Across the cancer care trajectory, from diagnosis to end-of life care, nurses play a critical role in the provision and coordination of care to ensure infection control as well as comprehensive physical and psychological support to address cancer patients and families at risk for and/or experiencing COVID-19.
- NNPBC understands that cancer patients and families who may be experiencing the implications of suspended and/or altered cancer treatment and systems of care during COVID-19 may have a heightened need for the psychosocial, emotional and spiritual support that nurses bring to their care.

- Nurses must have access to proper PPE in order to protect themselves and vulnerable and/or immunocompromised patients/clients.
- Nurses must be recognized for and be part of policy and decision making related to COVID-19 and cancer care.
- NNPBC encourages nurses to stay informed about policies and procedures at their worksites with respect to cancer care and COVID-19.

Further Reading/Resources

- [International Society of Nurses Cancer Care- Position Statement](#)
- [BC Cancer- Cancer Treatment and COVID-19 Information for Patients](#)
- [BC Cancer- Cancer Treatment and COVID-19 Information for Providers](#)
- [BC Cancer- Application of COVID-19 PPE](#)
- [The Lancet- Cancer Care in the time of COVID](#)
- [Canadian Cancer Society- Cancer and COVID-19](#)
- [MedScape- Maintaining Cancer Care During COVID](#)
- [CANO Standards of Care](#)
- Resources for Donning & Doffing PPE
 - [BCCDC Poster for Donning PPE During COVID-19](#)
 - [Video for donning PPE generic](#)
 - [BCCDC Poster for Doffing PPE During COVID-19](#)
 - [Video for doffing PPE generic](#) (note for COVID-19 hand hygiene is done after each item is removed)

Please feel free to direct questions and additional comments to info@nnpbc.com.

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