

Breast cancer treatment during COVID-19

Oncologists face a huge dilemma due to COVID-19. On one hand, a patient might be at high risk of contracting COVID-19 infection and dying from it; on the other hand, the patient might be at high risk of the cancer progressing or causing death if it is not treated appropriately. Oncologists have to evaluate whether treatment should be initiated as scheduled or delayed. And if delayed, how long is it safe to delay treatment? Various cancer focused organizations like American Society of Clinical Oncology, American College of Surgeons, European Society for Medical Oncology (ESMO), National Comprehensive Cancer Network and even medical societies in India like Indian Association of Surgical Oncology have established guidelines on cancer treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

They advocate that individual patient decisions have to be made by multidisciplinary teams who triage and prioritize treatment based on various parameters such as severity of disease, consequences of delaying treatment, COVID-19 transmission rate etc. They advocate deferring treatment where scientific evidence suggests it does not impact the patient's outcome. This is because both the cancer and the treatment can cause immunosuppression that increases the risk of contracting the COVID-19 infection. However, since cancer surgery and treatment are not elective procedures, the risk-benefit ratio for a patient has to clearly establish that postponing the treatment does not damage the patient's prognosis in the short and long-term.

Even if treatment is initiated, doctors have multiple options to de-escalate treatment today, in order to reduce hospital visits and reduce exposure to COVID-19. Taking the example of breast cancer, if diagnosed in early stages, as per ESMO guidelines patients who are hormone receptor positive can entirely avoid chemotherapy if they are low-risk as per a prognostic test.

Patients can opt for the 'CanAssist Breast' test that is well validated and affordable. CanAssist Breast is the only test validated on India patients. It classifies patients clearly into either low-risk or high-risk for recurrence. If a patient is low-risk, they can avoid chemotherapy and its toxic side-effects. Even can also avoid the financial toxicity of chemotherapy, during a time when COVID has already added an increased burden on people's finances. Over 250 oncologists across India trust CanAssist Breast and have used it to help personalize treatment for close to 1000 patients.

Patients should seek medical advice promptly, early diagnosis of cancer offers the best chance at beating it. Early diagnosis also means less aggressive treatment!