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Experts call for patients to access cancer services without delay

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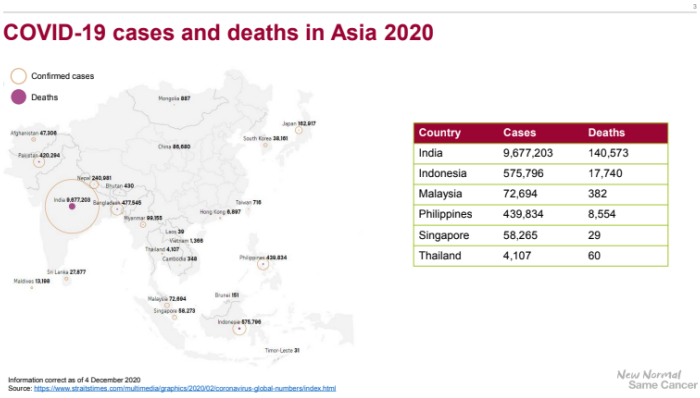
COVID-19 has had a significant impact on cancer services negatively across Asia and there has been a drop in the number of patients accessing cancer services in the region



Country	Cases	Deaths
India	9,677,203	140,573
Indonesia	575,796	17,740
Malaysia	72,694	382
Philippines	439,834	8,554
Singapore	58,265	29
Thailand	4,107	60

A coalition of leading Asian oncologists in partnership with UK based AstraZeneca are calling for patients to access cancer services without delay, as part of the New Normal, Same Cancer campaign. Although the long-term impact on patients is not fully known yet, recent research suggests that a one-month delay in treatment can result in 6% increase in risk of death, underscoring the urgent need for patients to get the care that they require as soon as possible.

The campaign encourages people diagnosed with cancer to resume treatment that may have been paused, and those people with possible cancer signs and symptoms or who have missed routine checks, to consult a doctor.

The coalition of experts from India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore made the following statement:
“Timely diagnosis and treatment are critical factors to determine the success of cancer treatment. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges to healthcare systems across Asia, including cancer services. As countries enter a ‘new normal’, we strongly urge cancer patients to access the right services without delay to give any treatment the best chances of success. For more information on the members of the coalition, refer to Annex A.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused disruptions to many services for people living with cancer in Asia over the last year, as well as cancer screening in some countries. Even where services were maintained, some patients are delaying appointments, treatment, and follow up appointments for fear of contracting the virus. In the Philippines, for example, a survey found that fear and anxiety of cancer patients brought about by worries of acquiring the virus affected the health-seeking behavior of those still about to be diagnosed.

There was a 9% drop in first visit consultations and 30% drop in follow up consultations at the National University Cancer Institute, Singapore (NCIS) between February and March 2020, although these numbers have recovered. And in a survey of 480 oncosurgeons across India, it is estimated that 192,000 patients are likely to have delays in the timely diagnosis of cancer.

Free annual Pap smear screening appointments fell by 75%.

To help protect people attending cancer clinics, many healthcare facilities have already adapted their practices and put in novel solutions to minimise the risk of COVID-19 transmission. For many countries, telehealth has become an important part of patient services, allowing healthcare professionals such as oncologists to check in with their patients and carry out remote screening without the need for the patient to leave their home.