



## Preventing delayed diagnosis of cancer: main problems and solutions

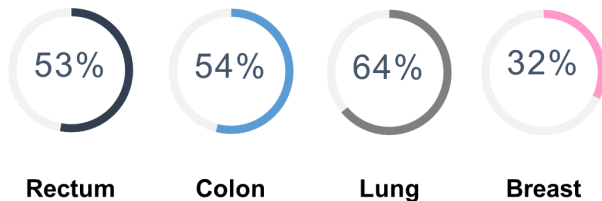
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February 4<sup>th</sup> marked **World Cancer Day** and the entire month is dedicated to awareness and prevention. In honor of this month, this article highlights the reasons for avoidable delays in cancer diagnosis and the role pharmaceutical companies can play in reducing them.

## Avoidable Delays in Cancer Diagnosis

In 2020 there will be an estimated 1.8 million new cancer diagnoses in the United States, with at least 42% of these diagnoses estimated to be partially preventable by a combination of behavioral changes, vaccination and treatment of infectious diseases.<sup>1</sup> Diagnosing cancer at early, localized stages, has a significant effect on survival. However, in the United States, the following cancers are diagnosed at regional or late stages: breast

### Late Stage Cancer Diagnosis Rates



(32.3%), lung (64.2%), colon (54%), and rectum (53%).<sup>2</sup> While there are many reasons why late diagnosis can occur, especially since many cancers are asymptomatic before spreading, this article is focused on highlighting the avoidable delays to diagnosis and briefly proposing solutions to reduce them.

Avoidable delays in detection, diagnosis and treatment of cancer can be attributed to different stakeholders along a patient's journey, including the patients themselves, their healthcare providers (HCP), and healthcare systems. Therefore, at the patient, HCP and healthcare systems levels **we need to understand the reasons why cancer diagnoses are delayed or misdiagnosed so we can identify the opportunity to correct these actions and make a true difference.**

### Why the delay?

While people may be aware of changes in their bodies, they can lack a sense of urgency to seek care, especially if they suspect that symptoms are benign or if they are fearful of the imminent diagnostic and treatment process.<sup>3,4</sup> Even in the most advanced stages of cancer, symptoms may go unnoticed or be misattributed to other causes, including a patient's pre-existing conditions.<sup>4</sup> While all population groups in the United States may experience these challenges, socioeconomic status, access to healthcare and cultural beliefs tend to disproportionately increase cancer diagnosis and treatment delays.<sup>5</sup> Decades of underrepresentation of women and racial/ethnic minorities in large clinical trials has caused these populations to access less of a benefit from advances in prevention, early detection and novel cancer treatments.<sup>6</sup>

Healthcare providers can also contribute to the delay in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer. Like many patients, providers can also interpret certain cancer symptoms as innocuous or misattribute them to more common diseases.<sup>7</sup> Further compounding these challenges is the fact that the healthcare system is more focused on treating patients who need urgent attention, leaving little resources to focus on early diagnosis and preventative care.

While medical providers strive to provide equality in care, internalization of cultural stereotypes and misinformation leads to implicit bias which may influence the processing of patient information and subsequent care. Implicit biases based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and age have all been shown to affect the quality of care for patients.<sup>8</sup> Women are often a victim of this type of bias with recent studies showing that physicians are dismissive of women's self-reported symptoms. Particularly with regards to pain, women are often told that they are "over-reacting", "emotional" or that their pain is "not-real".<sup>9</sup>

Even when HCPs choose to follow-up on concerning symptoms with diagnostic tests, delays often occur in this phase of a patient's journey. Such delays include but are not limited to: long appointment scheduling delays that can exceed months, provider interpretation periods and misinterpretation of test results.<sup>10</sup>

## How Pharma Can Help?



### Map the patient diagnostic journey

- Utilize multi-source claims data and primary market research to define the many routes to diagnosis and typical symptoms that lead to misdiagnosis
- Identify patients' unmet needs and barriers to diagnosis and treatment
- Leverage insights to create messages to improve patient engagement
- Uncover gaps in health systems
- Create materials to educate HCPs about the most up-to-date diagnostic method resources
- Educate HCPs about the differences in cancer symptoms between men and women and how implicit bias can impact early diagnosis rates



### Identify early symptom clusters and create awareness

- Use internal analysis of clinical data to define early symptom clusters by pinpointing symptoms that may be overlooked or lead to misdiagnosis
- Share these learnings with HCPs and patients to help raise awareness about early symptoms to prompt further diagnostic intervention



### Leverage digital channels to intercept target audiences

- Intercept and communicate early detection messages targeted to different patient and HCP segments using digital marketing
- Optimize message distribution by using digital channels such as search engine ads and social media



## Communicate messages with videos

- Convert text dense messages into more simplified videos or interactive quizzes to enhance patient and HCP engagement
  - One study showed the viewers retain 95% of a video's messages as compared to 10% when reading the text<sup>11</sup>
- Increase message effectiveness by using cancer prevention education or awareness videos that portray the right emotional and motivational response triggers to drive action
- Use patient testimonial videos to shed light on the diagnostic process while simultaneously addressing and easing common fears and sources of anxiety

Successfully reducing avoidable delays in cancer diagnosis requires a multipronged approach that involves identifying and understanding the challenges faced by consumers/patients and HCPs. Fortunately, more pharma companies are conducting patient journey analyses to pinpoint these challenges. Insights from these analyses should be leveraged to develop customizable approaches to overcoming the various patient and HCP factors that contribute to delays in diagnosis.



## Contact Us

For more information or to discuss how Herspiegel Consulting can help with patient journey analyses and subsequent strategic message development and planning, please contact Amber Kelly at [Amber@Herspiegel.com](mailto:Amber@Herspiegel.com).

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