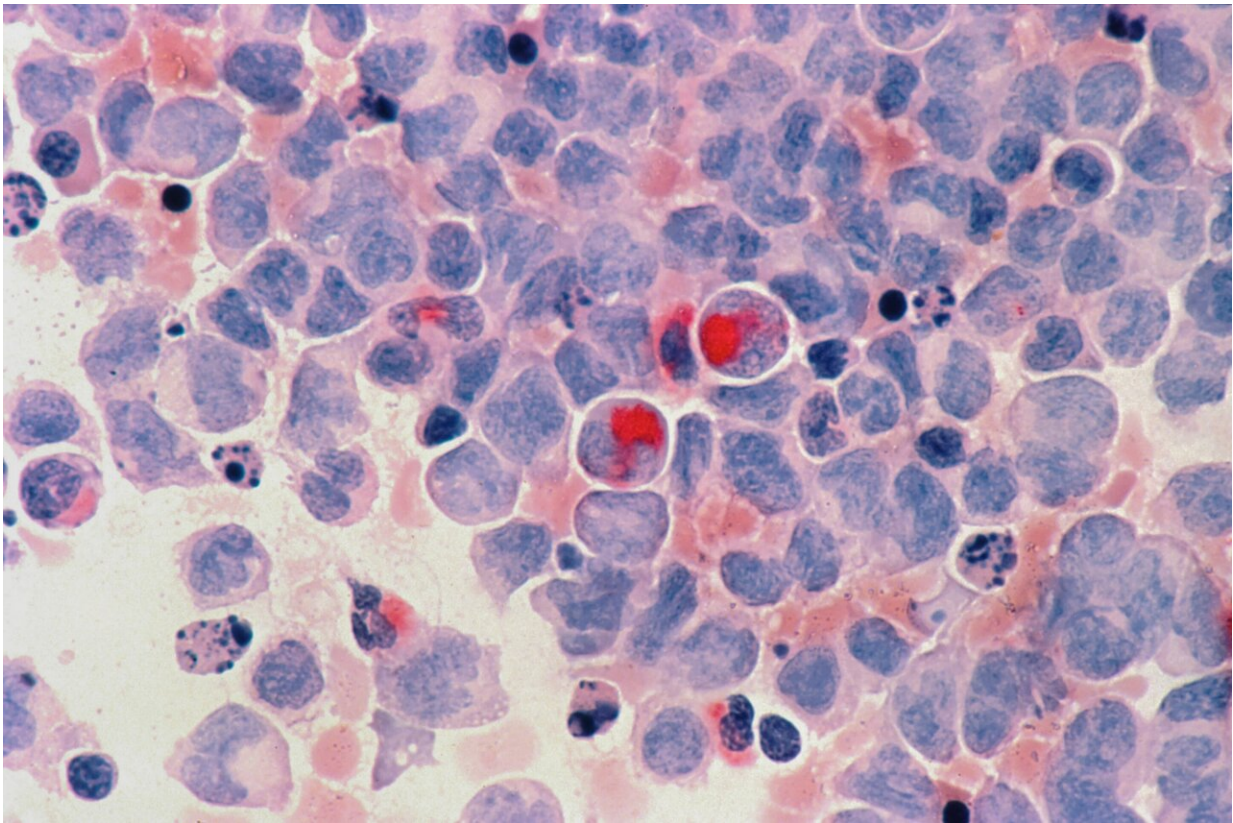


# Cancer diagnoses dropped sharply in Alberta during COVID-19 response

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Pandemic restrictions corresponded with a significant drop in diagnoses of breast, colorectal and prostate cancers as well as melanoma, according to a new Alberta study published in *CMAJ* (*Canadian Medical*

*Association Journal*).

"The sweeping and unprecedented measures enacted at the beginning of the COVID-19 [pandemic](#) in Alberta had an inevitable impact on [cancer](#) care," writes Dr. Darren Brenner, an epidemiologist in Calgary, Alberta, and associate professor at the University of Calgary's Cumming School of Medicine, with co-authors. "Even though treatment and urgent surgeries for cancers were prioritized when other procedures were delayed or canceled, preventive and diagnostic services were greatly reduced."

The study compared [survival rates](#) for three groups of patients diagnosed between January 16, 2018, and March 15, 2019; March 16, 2019, and March 15, 2020; and March 16 and December 15, 2020. The researchers divided the third period into a "state of emergency" (SOE) phase (March 16 to June 15, 2020) and post-SOE phase (June 16 to December 15, 2020).

Researchers saw large reductions in the number of new diagnoses for some [cancer types](#) during the SOE period, with a drop of 43% (melanoma), 36% (colorectal and prostate) and 33% (breast). In the post-SOE phase, diagnoses increased 9%, 8% and 10% per month, respectively. Other cancers, such as bladder, kidney, lung and cervical, did not show decreases in diagnoses during that period.

"Our findings that early-stage breast and colorectal cancer had the largest decrease in diagnoses suggest that a reduction in screening services during the first wave of pandemic-related restrictions in Alberta resulted in asymptomatic individuals receiving a diagnosis later than they would have otherwise," write the authors. "These results highlight the importance of screening services in reducing late-stage cancer diagnoses."

Patients with [colorectal cancer](#) and non-Hodgkin lymphoma diagnosed during the pandemic period in 2020 had poorer one-year survival than those diagnosed in 2018.

By December 2020, the rate of diagnoses had returned to a level more in line with pre-SOE levels.

The findings are consistent with studies from the United Kingdom, United States, the Netherlands, Germany, Japan and other parts of Canada. In Ontario, there was a 34% drop in new cancer diagnoses in April 2020, and Manitoba had a 23% reduction in the same period. An estimated 15% reduction in Quebec occurred in the first year of the pandemic.

Cancer care must become more efficient and increase capacity to reduce long-term effects of the pandemic on cancer outcomes, the authors conclude.

**More information:** Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cancer diagnoses, stage and survival in Alberta, *Canadian Medical Association Journal* (2023). [DOI: 10.1503/cmaj.221512](https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.221512)

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