

Mailed orders found to double liver cancer screening rates

December 22 2023



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Liver cancer screening among patients with cirrhosis almost doubled

when they were mailed a signed order from their specialist, according to a new study from the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. However, when researchers added an incentive of \$20 to the mailed orders, it made no difference in whether patients completed their screenings. The work was [published](#) this week in *Hepatology Communications*.

"Our findings show that an approach like this can meaningfully increase [liver cancer](#) surveillance, which is particularly important in a group of [patients](#) who are high risk for liver cancer," said Shivan Mehta, MD, MBA, an associate professor of Gastroenterology and the associate chief innovation officer at Penn Medicine.

The study's intervention took place across three different time periods stretching across 2020 and 2021 and involved a diverse cohort of more than 500 patients. When patients were mailed the order to get an abdominal ultrasound, approximately 55% completed their [screening](#) within six months of the letter going out. In the arm that received the usual care—being offered the screening by a gastroenterologist or hepatologist during routine office visits—just 27% of the patients got their ultrasound.

Letters mailed with the screening orders to patients included information on why the ultrasounds were important for patients with cirrhosis: Chiefly, those with the condition are at particular risk for [hepatocellular carcinoma](#), a major cause of cancer deaths worldwide.

"It is so important to screen patients with cirrhosis for liver cancer since early detection improves survival," said study lead author Kenneth Rothstein, MD, a professor of Gastroenterology and regional director of Hepatology at the University of Pennsylvania Health System.

"Unfortunately, only 20% of people with cirrhosis in this country are being screened correctly, which results in many early and unnecessary

deaths from liver cancer."

By using mailed orders and the letters explaining the risk, the researchers hoped to make the [right decision](#)—getting a screening ultrasound—the easiest for patients. It follows the principle of "nudging," a behavioral science technique meant to subtly and easily move people toward making positive decisions.

To that end, the researchers added a third arm of the study that not just included mailing orders for screening, but also offered an unconditional \$20 incentive just for opening the mail. Yet, the rate of patients who completed their screening in that arm of the study was nearly identical to the regular, non-incentive mailed order arm: 54.1% in the incentive group versus 54.5% in the non-incentive.

"There is mixed data on the effectiveness of financial incentives for preventive health activities," Mehta explained. "It may not be something that patients are used to getting from their clinicians through direct mail, so they were not sure about the context. Also, perhaps larger incentives or a conditional incentive—such as only receiving the cash if the screening is complete—may be more effective."

This latest study builds on similar evidence from [a previous study Mehta helped lead](#), which showed that 29% of people overdue for screening mailed back colorectal [cancer](#) screening kits that were sent to their homes. Then, too, the positive results were achieved regardless of financial incentive.

An [additional recent study by Mehta](#) also found mail to be effective compared to electronic messaging when patients were reminded to get screened for hepatitis C.

As such, mail appears to have a particular advantage over some other

methods of communication with patients.

"While more of our patients have access to internet, smartphones, and text messaging, there is still differential access," said Mehta. "However, most patients are able to receive mailings. Ultimately, our goal is to communicate with patients through the method that they choose or have the best access to."

More information: Shivan J. Mehta et al, A randomized trial of mailed outreach with behavioral economic interventions to improve liver cancer surveillance, *Hepatology Communications* (2023). [DOI: 10.1097/HC9.0000000000000349](https://doi.org/10.1097/HC9.0000000000000349)

Provided by Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania

Citation: Mailed orders found to double liver cancer screening rates (2023, December 22) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-12-mailed-liver-cancer-screening.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.