

COVID-19 & RADIATION ONCOLOGY

Results of a national physician survey by the American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO)

Overview




One year into the COVID-19 pandemic, doctors who treat people with cancer are seeing the harmful effects of the pandemic on their patients. A national survey of radiation oncologists fielded in early 2021 finds that new patients are coming in for radiation treatment with more advanced-stage cancers, and many existing patients have experienced pandemic-related interruptions during their treatment.

The findings also offer hope, however, as patients appear more comfortable returning to their doctors' offices. Radiation therapy clinics continue to use a variety of enhanced safety protocols, and doctors are reporting dramatically fewer treatment deferrals and postponements.

This report includes results from a survey conducted by American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO). A total of 117 radiation oncology practice leaders completed the survey online between January 15 and February 7, 2021. Previous iterations of the survey were collected in April, May and June 2020. For more information about ASTRO's response to COVID-19 and resources for providers and patients, visit astro.org/covid19.

Key Survey Findings

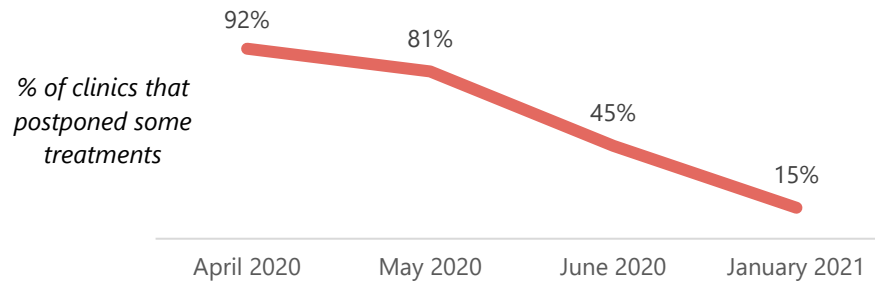
Doctors report that people with cancer are facing additional burden due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Two-thirds of the physicians said **new patients are presenting with more advanced disease** compared to before the pandemic. 
- Nearly three-fourths noticed missed cancer screenings among their patient populations, echoing [the existing data](#) on lapsed screenings. 
- Two-thirds said their **existing patients experienced treatment interruptions** due to the pandemic, most often caused by COVID-19 quarantine or illness of the patient or their caregiver. 
- Because the [pandemic](#) and [cancer](#) cause disproportionately more harm for Black and other medically underserved populations, these rates may be even higher for some vulnerable communities.

Enhanced safety protocols in radiation therapy remain widespread, and patients are returning to care.

- **Clinics continue to use enhanced safety protocols** to protect patients and staff. Masking (99%), social distancing (100%) and screening for COVID-19 exposure (95%) are nearly universal. Increased sterilization (93%), face shields for staff (80%) and no-visitor policies (73%) are also common.
- **Most clinics are no longer deferring or postponing radiation treatments.** Only 15% reported postponing treatment for disease that can be temporarily managed with other therapy in early 2021,

compared to 92% in the early weeks of the pandemic. Similarly, 12% reported deferring any new patient visits in 2021, compared to 75% earlier in the pandemic.

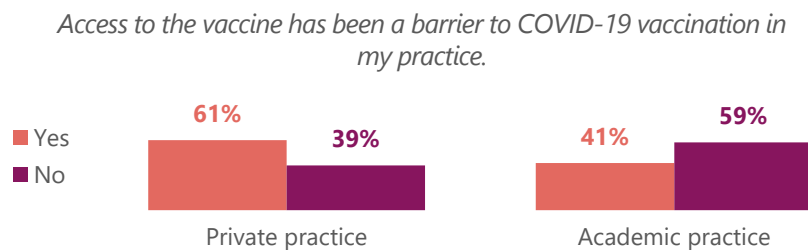


- 100% of the physicians surveyed said their **radiation therapy networks remained open** during multiple spikes of the pandemic. Just 7% closed any satellite locations.

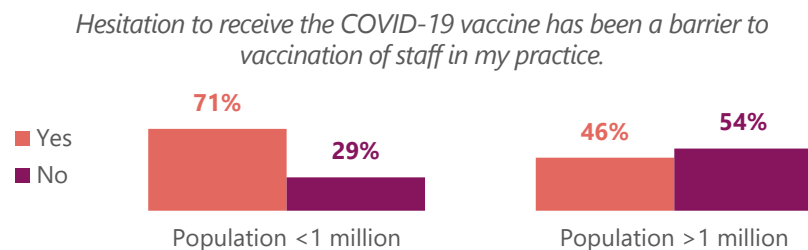
Additional Survey Findings

The pandemic is not affecting all clinics equally. Pandemic-related treatment interruptions, for example, were more common for patients at community-based private practices than for those at academic practices. Differences also emerged regarding the COVID-19 vaccine:

- More than half (53%) of the physicians said **access to the vaccine** was a barrier. Vaccine access was significantly better for radiation therapy clinics in major metro areas and for those affiliated with universities, compared to private, community-based practices.



- More than half of the respondents said **hesitation to receive the vaccine** had been a barrier to COVID-19 vaccination among staff (59%) and patients (52%). Vaccine hesitation was significantly more common outside of major metro areas, and also for community-based practices compared to academic practices.



Telemedicine remains popular, especially for routine care.

- The vast majority of practices (85%) offer **telemedicine** options for follow-up surveillance visits, and more than half (54%) do so for new patient consultations. Fewer clinics (15%) use telemedicine for clinician assessments of patients who are undergoing radiation treatments.

Radiation therapy practices continue to face financial and operational challenges created by the pandemic.

- **Patient volume dropped** at 73% of clinics due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On average, visits were down 21% (range 5-75%). These declines were due mostly to fewer patients being referred for radiation therapy (81% of those reporting declines) and pandemic-related treatment delays (75%).
- The early **shortages of personal protective equipment** (PPE) and other critical resources have subsided but not disappeared. Nearly half of the clinics (42%) still report difficulty accessing resources, most commonly PPE (38%) and medical-grade hand sanitizer (21%).
- Most practices (72%) have **reduced staff** at some point due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The medical directors in this survey also expressed concern for pandemic-related stress among their colleagues; general well-being (85%), burnout (78%) and work/life balance (75%) were common concerns.

Survey Methodology

An online survey was sent by email to 509 radiation oncologists identified in ASTRO's member database as medical directors of U.S. based radiation oncology practices, and 117 physicians completed the survey online January 15 through February 7, 2021 (23% response rate).

Respondent demographics:

- *Practice Type*: 55% private practice/community-based, 44% academic/university-based, 1% government/public sector
- *Practice Location*: 68% hospital, 32% free-standing/satellite clinic
- *U.S. Region*: 17% West, 27% Midwest, 32% South, 24% Northeast (based on [U.S. Census](#) categories)
- *Community Type*: 84% metro, 16% nonmetro (based on [USDA](#) Rural-Urban Continuum Codes; 52% of respondents practice in a major metro area with a population of 1,000,000+)

Previous iterations of ASTRO's COVID-19 Practice Response Survey were collected April 16-30, 2020 (n=222), April 30-May 14, 2020 (n=156) and June 11-25, 2020 (n=159).

About ASTRO

The American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO) is the largest radiation oncology society in the world, with more than 10,000 members who are physicians, nurses, biologists, physicists, radiation therapists, dosimetrists and other health care professionals who specialize in treating patients with radiation therapies. For information on radiation therapy, visit [RTAnswers.org](https://www.rtan.org/). To learn more about ASTRO, visit our [website](#) and follow us on [social media](#).