

Letter to the Editor

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Did Individuals' Fear of COVID-19 Affect Their Participation in Cancer Screenings? An Example from Eastern Turkey

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Abstract

This letter presents key findings from a study conducted in Eastern Turkey, which explored the impact of individuals' fear of COVID-19 on their participation in cancer screenings. Data from 393 participants aged 50–70 years revealed that higher levels of COVID-19 fear significantly decreased the likelihood of engaging in screening behaviors during the pandemic. The study highlights that fear of infection led to health care avoidance, posing a barrier to early cancer detection. These findings underscore the importance of addressing psychological factors such as fear during public health emergencies to ensure continued access to preventive care.

Dear Editor,

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted not only infectious disease management but also access to preventive health care services worldwide. Among the most affected were cancer screenings—key interventions in reducing cancer-related mortality.¹ During the pandemic, many individuals avoided health institutions due to fear of virus transmission, which may have played a central role in declining cancer screening rates.^{1,2}

We conducted a study in Erzurum, Eastern Turkey, involving 393 individuals aged 50–70, to examine the relationship between fear of COVID-19 and participation in cancer screenings. Data were collected through an online questionnaire using the Fear of COVID-19 Scale and a socio-demographic information form. The mean Fear of COVID-19 score was 19.59±6.98, indicating an above-average level of fear among participants.

Statistical analysis revealed that increased fear of COVID-19 significantly reduced cancer screening participation. Furthermore, higher fear levels were associated with avoiding health care institutions due to fear of infection and a decreased willingness to consider cancer screening should the pandemic continue.

Fear was notably higher among women, those with lower education and income levels, individuals diagnosed with cancer or with relatives who had cancer, and those who either had undergone cancer screenings or avoided health care facilities during the pandemic. These findings suggest that psychological responses, especially fear, influenced public health behaviors even in areas critical for early diagnosis and mortality reduction.^{3–5}

This study appears to be among the first in Turkey to provide empirical evidence linking fear of COVID-19 with cancer screening behavior. The findings underscore the need to address psychosocial barriers to preventive health care during public health crises. Particularly, primary care providers should be equipped to inform and reassure the public to mitigate fear-driven health care avoidance.⁵

We recommend awareness campaigns and educational interventions led by community health professionals to reduce public fear and maintain engagement with cancer screening programs during future health emergencies.

Data availability statement. The data for this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author contribution. Study conception and design: SB, HYB; Data collection: SB; Data analysis and interpretation: SB, HYB. Drafting of the article: SB, HYB; Critical revision of the article: SB, HYB.

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Ethical standard. Ethical committee approval was received from the Ethics Committee of Ataturk University (Date of approval:15.04.2021 and Number: B.30.2.ATA.0.01.00/140)

Informed consent was obtained from participants.

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