# No increased COVID-19 risk for patients receiving cancer treatments in hospital

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A study led by MedUni Vienna has analyzed COVID-19 infection rates among cancer patients treated at Vienna General Hospital. It showed that due to strict safety precautions in patient care, COVID-19 infection rates

were not higher than in the general population. Therefore, receiving cancer treatment at the hospital does not present an increased risk of contracting the disease. The results were published in the highly respected *Journal of Clinical Oncology*.

Due to their illness and compromised immune system, cancer patients are more likely to pick up infections. On the other hand, if they stay away from hospitals and clinics for the purpose of social distancing, they will miss important treatment sessions and examinations.

An inter-university research team, led by Matthias Preusser, Head of the Division of Oncology at MedUni Vienna and Vienna General Hospital, carried out 1,688 nasopharyngeal swab tests on 1,016 cancer patients between 21 March and 4 May 2020. A total of four of these patients tested positive. Results from testing were compared with data from the Austria-wide SARS-CoV-2 prevalence study by the SORA Institute, and a control group of non-cancer patients who had been tested at the entrance to Vienna General Hospital. The statistical analysis, conducted by Margaretha Gansterer (University of Klagenfurt), Arne Bathke, Wolfgang Trutschnig (both at the University of Salzburg) and Norbert Mauser (University of Vienna) shows that, given the strict safety precautions in place, there is no increased risk of infection for cancer patients. Gansterer and Bathke are also members of the Future Operations Clearing Board, a platform for scientists who are making their expertise available to the federal government during the crisis. Both are convinced that the study is of great interest to policymakers.

"Our data show a low rate of verified SARS-CoV-2 infections among cancer patients. This infection rate was comparable with that among the general population in Austria, and lower than the rate among non-cancer patients in our hospital," explained lead author Anna Berghoff from the Division of Oncology at MedUni Vienna and Vienna General Hospital. Berghoff and Preusser are also members of the Comprehensive Cancer

Center Vienna. "We can report that continued care and treatment for cancer patients from the population of a city affected by the COVID-19 pandemic was shown to be possible and safe."

"Our results show that when strict safety precautions are followed, cancer treatments can continue at a large hospital in a city affected by a pandemic, without resulting in higher risk of infection," explained study coordinator Matthias Preusser. "At the same time, the results underline the necessity of implementing strict guidelines in order to assure the safety of healthcare workers and patients at a clinic with high patient turnover. Regular testing to identify patients who are asymptomatic carriers of the disease is especially important, as otherwise they will pass on the virus without realizing it."

The most important safety measures comprise hygiene precautions, personal protective equipment, physical distancing rules, and regular testing regardless of symptoms in order to identify and isolate infected patients quickly.

**More information:** Anna S. Berghoff et al. SARS-CoV-2 Testing in Patients With Cancer Treated at a Tertiary Care Hospital During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Journal of Clinical Oncology* (2020). DOI: 10.1200/JCO.20.01442

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