Protecting cancer patients from COVID-19

UCI Health adds safety measures and infusion center hours to keep patients safe.

Because the novel coronavirus poses a greater risk to people undergoing cancer treatments, UCI Health oncology experts are urging these patients to take precautions to avoid infection.

The UCI Health Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center also has adopted new measures to protect patient safety during appointments and treatments, including increased infusion center hours.

“Based on the initial data coming out of China, cancer patients may have an increased risk of serious illness from COVID-19,” said Dr. Emad Elquza, medical director of UCI Health Oncology Services. This is based on small numbers of patients, so the actual risk is not yet known.

“It is important to remember that while the majority of patients infected will have mild symptoms, it is critical that we take the necessary steps to ensure the health and safety of our patients.”

Weakened immune systems a concern

Elquza said the most vulnerable are people undergoing chemotherapy and those who recently finished their cancer treatments because chemotherapy can leave patients with weakened immune systems.

For those patients, he said, it is vital to avoid exposure to COVID-19 by staying home and avoiding crowds if you do need to go out in public.

Have family, friends or other helpers in your community handle your shopping and errands and learn how to bring food into the house safely, washing or sanitizing it or the containers in which it’s packed.

“It is essential to practice social distancing,” Elquza said, by observing the rule of staying at least six feet from others.

Patients — as well as those around them, and for that matter, all people — should follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations to wash their hands for 20 seconds frequently, vigorously and with soap and water. When soap and water aren’t readily available, use hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol content.

Safety measures added

The cancer center also has implemented a wide range of new safety practices. The first step is to let patients stay at home if they can.

For some who require regular infusions, doctors are exploring the option of changing therapies to oral medications so that patients don’t have to leave home for treatment, Elquza said.

UCI Health doctors also are advising patients to try to get a 90-day supply of their prescription medications rather than a 30-day supply to reduce trips to a pharmacy.

If you think you may have been exposed to the novel coronavirus, or if you have symptoms such as a fever, dry cough and shortness of breath, it is important to call your healthcare provider.
Virtual appointments
Telemedicine – video medical visits instead of traveling to the doctor – have become a vital new tool at the cancer center, Elquza said. UCI Health expects to expand its video visit offerings after April 1.

“Those who are under surveillance for their cancer rather than undergoing treatment should be able to have a 100% virtual visit with their healthcare provider, reducing the risk of the patient being exposed or exposing others,” he said. “So far the experience has been very positive.”

The feedback has been so positive that even after the coronavirus outbreak is over, telemedicine visits may be implemented long-term if appropriate.

Prescreening measures
For patients who need to see their doctor in person, an extensive protocol has been designed to keep them safe.

First, patients with in-person appointments are screened by phone to determine if they have any symptoms associated with COVID-19, such as a fever or cough.

Those with symptoms may be referred to a triage telephone line to make an appointment at a UCI Health drive-through testing center in Orange or Irvine. Results may take one to two days.

When pre-screened patients arrive at the cancer center, a greeter at clinic entrances performs additional screening.

Patients are asked not to bring any visitors with them unless absolutely necessary.

Infusion center changes
At UCI Health infusion centers, more space has been created between stations.

In addition, the infusion center in Orange is in the process of expanding its hours to seven days a week so that fewer patients are there at any one time and those who are can be spaced safely apart, Elquza said.

For patients scheduled for procedures or surgery who are wondering if they should go ahead, if the treatment is essential, the answer is yes, he said.

The cancer center’s overriding goal is to keep patients safe, to continue helpful treatments and to minimize worry. Elquza urged patients with concerns or questions about COVID-19 to call the center’s main number, 714-456-8000.

“Cancer is a life-threatening illness,” he said. “We want our patients to know that we are here for you.”

Learn more about CDC guidelines for protecting yourself from COVID-19.

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