Breast and Colorectal Cancer Screening Rebound From Pandemic-Related Declines, but Cervical Cancer Screening Yet to Return, New ACS Study Finds

American Cancer Society researchers stress the need to improve cancer screening for all populations

ATLANTA, March 5, 2025 — Research led by investigators at the American Cancer Society (ACS) shows both breast and colorectal cancer (CRC) screening rebounded from declines during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States and surpassed screening estimates prior to the pandemic. However, nearly three years after COVID-19, cervical cancer screening rates remain below pre-pandemic levels, and improvements in breast and CRC screening rates were mostly restricted to individuals with higher socioeconomic status (higher education, privately insured, Medicare insured). The study is out today in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA).

“These findings are mostly encouraging as the pandemic resulted in widespread disruptions in cancer screening in the U.S.,” said Jessica Star, associate scientist, cancer risk factors and screening surveillance research at the American Cancer Society and lead author of the study. “However, the continued decline in cervical cancer screening is troubling as diagnoses of cervical cancers at an early stage, when they are more treatable, also decreased during the pandemic. Without returns to cervical cancer screening, prevention and early-stage diagnoses may continue to drop and put more lives at risk.”

Researchers analyzed data obtained from the National Health Interview Survey, a nationally representative cross-sectional household survey of noninstitutionalized adults. Primary outcomes were self-reported breast, cervical, and CRC screening, with colonoscopy and stool-based testing also measured separately. Screening was measured within the past year to estimate changes during three distinct exposure periods: before (2019), during (2021), and after (2023) the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2023, 6,829, 8,888, and 13,144 sampled individuals were eligible for breast, cervical, and CRC screening. Study results showed that past-year breast and CRC screening in 2023 exceeded 2019 levels by 7% and 12% respectively because of sharp increases between 2021-2023 that offset declines or flat trends observed during the pandemic. Past-year cervical cancer screening in 2023 remained 14% below 2019 levels, with no change between 2021 and 2023. Improvements were restricted to higher SES groups. Screening for CRC only significantly increased between 2019-2023 in individuals with higher levels of educational attainment. Similarly, breast and CRC screening only significantly improved in individuals with private or Medicare insurance.

“The persistent decline in cervical cancer screening may in part reflect longer-term declines in patient knowledge and clinicians recommending the test,” added Star. “It’s imperative that we continue to advocate for returns to cervical cancer screening and efforts must also address the widening disparities in all cancer screenings by socioeconomic status.”

Other ACS researchers contributing to the study include Dr. Xuesong Han, Dr. Robert Smith, Elizabeth Schafer, Dr. Ahmedin Jemal, and senior author Dr. Priti Bandi.

Additional ACS Resources:

- Cancer Screening Information
- Get Screened
- Cancer Statistics Center

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The American Cancer Society is a leading cancer-fighting organization with a vision to end cancer as we know it,

for everyone. For more than 110 years, we have been improving the lives of people with cancer and their families as the only organization combating cancer through advocacy, research, and patient support. We are committed to ensuring everyone has an opportunity to prevent, detect, treat, and survive cancer. To learn more, visit cancer.org or call our 24/7 helpline at 1-800-227-2345. Connect with us on Facebook, X, and Instagram.

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