The Pandemic Is Harming Women's Health

Experts stress that despite COVID-19, women's health must be made a primary concern.

March 3, 2021 By Caroline Tien

Women's health has been adversely affected by the pandemic in a big way. Despite expert advice to the contrary, some countries, striving to reduce COVID-19 infection rates, have limited or suspended access to female sexual and reproductive health services. These services may include abortion, cervical cancer screening, breast cancer screening and the sale of contraceptive devices and medications. In addition, sexual harassment, rape and forced marriage are on the rise worldwide. Such gender-based acts of violence increased by 175% from 2019 to 2020 in Colombia alone, according to The Lancet.

Consequently, The Lancet predicts the consequences of extended lockdowns or travel restrictions could be dire. The British medical journal cites data that show millions of women and girls could experience accidental pregnancy and thousands could die as a result. In India, for example, botched abortions are the third leading cause of maternal death, according to the Foundation for Reproductive Health Services India. In addition, experts also anticipate a spike in sexually transmitted infections.

"The risk of sexually transmitted infections, in particular HIV, going in the wrong direction could be catastrophic," Natalia Kanem, the executive director of the United Nations Population Fund, told The Lancet.

COVID-19 has also derailed screenings such as Pap smears, human papillomavirus (HPV) tests and mammograms and triggered a drastic drop in screenings for colon and breast cancer. In many parts of the world, abortion and contraception services have become inaccessible. Early in the pandemic, some hospitals and clinics in the United States delayed or canceled routine appointments and exams in accordance with initial guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. What's more, many patients elected to skip nonurgent and nonemergency medical procedures for fear of contracting COVID-19.

The findings have "important public health implications," Chun Chao, a research scientist at Kaiser Permanente Southern California, told Medical Xpress. "Delayed or missed cancer screenings could lead to increased risk of cancer and more advanced disease when diagnosed."

The Lancet estimated that the United Kingdom will face an increase of as much as 9.6% in breast cancer deaths in the next five years as a result, demonstrating the necessity of balancing COVID-19 risk and cancer risk during the pandemic.

According to Medical Xpress, in January, more than 75 medical organizations issued a statement calling for the immediate resumption of checkups and cancer screenings.

For more on the risks women face when denied access to preventive medical care, read "COVID-19 Leads to Drop in Cancer Diagnosis" and "When Women's Health Clinics Close, More Women Die of Cervical Cancer."

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