

# Let's close the gap: Cancer screening deficits associated with COVID-19

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After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of preventive health screenings, including cancer screenings, dropped significantly during 2020. An estimated 3.9 million breast cancer, 3.8 million colorectal cancer, and 1.6 million prostate cancer screenings did not take place that otherwise would have.<sup>1</sup> This was due to screening facilities closing temporarily as well as people being afraid to go to medical facilities for non-emergency screenings for fear of catching COVID-19.<sup>2</sup> These missed screenings can have a major impact on detecting cancer at earlier stages—contributing to an increase in cancer-related deaths.<sup>3</sup>

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## A proactive approach to restore pre-pandemic screening rates

The American College of Surgeons and the American Cancer Society collaborated to create an initiative that aims to close the COVID-induced screening gap by helping facilities implement interventions to bring their screening rates back to pre-pandemic levels.<sup>2</sup> In the Return to Screening study that was part of the overall initiative, 748 accredited cancer facilities implemented interventions from June through November 2021 to increase the rate of breast, lung, colorectal, and cervical cancer screenings.

Interventions included social media campaigns, patient education, the use of simple language and multiple languages in materials, reminding doctors to order screening tests, extending the hours when screening is available, and providing financial support to uninsured individuals. Each participating facility was encouraged to implement multiple interventions. By the end of the study, several cancer facilities reached pre-pandemic screening rates or had higher than pre-pandemic screening rates.

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. As you see patients, please encourage them to stay up to date with *all* of their recommended preventive screenings.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: [National Library of Medicine, "Association of Cancer Screening Deficit in the United States With the COVID-19 Pandemic"](#)

<sup>2</sup> Source: [National Cancer Institute, "Working to Close the Cancer Screening Gap Caused by COVID"](#)

<sup>3</sup> Source: [National Library of Medicine, "A national quality improvement study identifying and addressing cancer screening deficits due to the COVID-19 pandemic"](#)

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