



Effectively Messaging Cancer Screening During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Issue Brief



THE ISSUE

1. Increased Cancer Mortality

Pandemic-related reductions in health care access and cancer screening will result in a short-term drop in cancer diagnoses and a later corresponding increase in late-stage cancer diagnoses and preventable deaths.

2. Increased Disparities

The COVID-19 pandemic will likely exacerbate these social and economic obstacles and disproportionately affect disadvantaged and underrepresented populations.

GUIDANCE ON SAFELY RETURNING TO SCREENING

The American Cancer Society (ACS) recognizes the impact the pandemic is having on cancer care and is supporting nationwide screening efforts by educating people on safely returning to screening.

1. Despite the challenges we face during the pandemic, cancer screening remains a public health priority.
2. Efforts to promote screening and overcome barriers for populations with low screening prevalence must be at the forefront of our focus.
3. Engaging patients in the resumption of cancer screening will require effective and trustworthy messaging.
4. Implementation of process and policy changes are urgently needed to sustain access to primary care and not only return screening to pre-pandemic rates, but also to continue to improve on the pre-pandemic rates.

To learn more, see the [ACS Guide](#) on safely resuming screening during the pandemic.

PANDEMIC IMPACT IN NUMBERS

35%

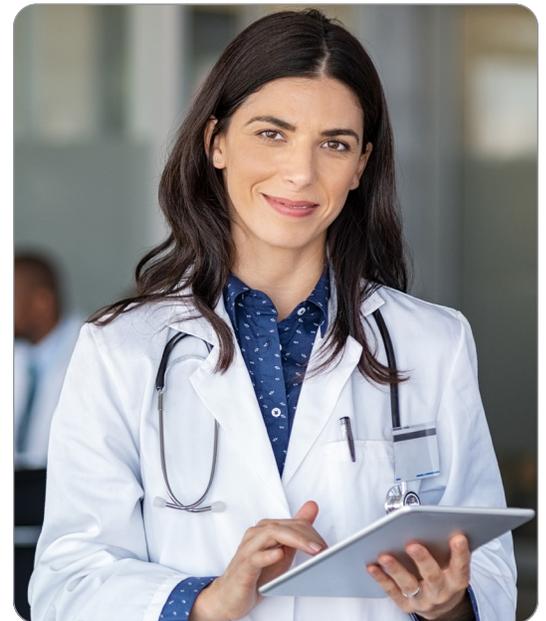
An estimated 35% of Americans **missed routine cancer screening** due to COVID-19-related fears and care disruptions when many facilities reduced or suspended services.

78%

Four months into the pandemic, **preventive care gaps persisted** with 78% of primary care survey respondents reporting that patients were delaying or deferring preventive and chronic care visits.

12M

An estimated 12 million individuals have **lost their employer-sponsored health insurance** coverage, disproportionately impacting African Americans and Hispanics.



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THE NEED FOR TAKING ACTION

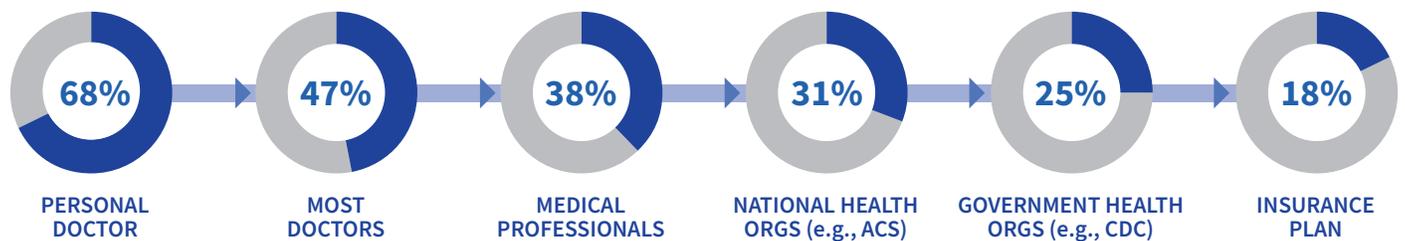
As restrictions are eased and patients schedule cancer screenings, health care providers, health systems, and public health-focused community organizations will need to do more than simply reopen facilities and offer screening. Patients should also be informed about the importance of routine cancer screening and about the measures being taken to protect their health when visiting health facilities.

Patients will need messages that are:

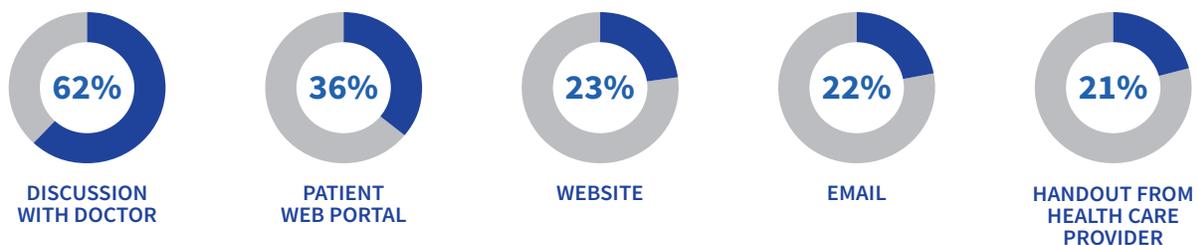
- Clear and concise
- Culturally competent
- Trustworthy
- Reassuring
- Coordinated across delivery channels

ACS market research identified the following most trusted messengers and preferred communication channels for delivering cancer screening information to people.

TRUSTED MESSENGERS



PREFERRED CHANNELS



TOP BARRIERS TO CANCER SCREENING



No Symptoms (27%)

They don't have symptoms, so they don't seek screening.



Cost (18%)

They are concerned about the affordability of screening.



Procrastination (22%)

They will be screened eventually, but they have not done it yet.



COVID-19 (14%)

They are reluctant to visit a medical facility during the pandemic.



Lack of Recommendation (20%)

Their doctor or health care provider has not recommended it.



Lack of Insurance (13%)

They don't have insurance, so they are concerned about the cost of going to the doctor.

PANDEMIC DISRUPTIONS TO HEALTH CARE

More than 50% of individuals in almost every demographic group reported that their medical care was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.



PREFERRED CANCER SCREENING MESSAGES

In a recent market research survey, the first three general cancer screening messages below ranked closely together in overall preference. Tested messages focusing on COVID-19 ranked notably lower, perhaps indicating pandemic fatigue. However, the fourth message performed best out of the pandemic-related messages and topped all messages in the believability attribute.

CATCH CANCER EARLY

Catch cancer early when it's easier to treat. Regular screening tests can improve and save your life.

WHY IT RESONATES

This message is straightforward and reflects a more helpful tone, which encourages more patients to **talk to their doctor**. The highest scoring attributes for this message were “easy to understand,” “believable,” and “compelling.”



WHO IT RESONATES WITH

This message is effective across all groups, and when compared to other messages, appealed most with:

- Individuals aged 60 and over
- Those earning less than \$50,000 annually

LEADS WITH DATA

1 in 3 Americans will get cancer in their lifetime, but finding cancer early means it may be easier to treat.

WHY IT RESONATES

The statistic is effective in catching the audience's attention, while the second half of the statement shows that harm can be mitigated if patients **take action**. The highest scoring attributes for this message were: “easy to understand,” “believable,” “creates urgency,” and “compelling.”



WHO IT RESONATES WITH

This message is effective across all groups, and when compared to other messages, appealed most with:

- Hispanics
- Those earning more than \$100,000 annually
- Unscreened individuals

PREFERRED CANCER SCREENING MESSAGES

CLEAR AND OPTIMISTIC

Screening tests increase the chance of detecting some cancers early, when they may be easier to treat.

WHY IT RESONATES

This message is simple and optimistic, and its positive tone reflects the **benefits of cancer screening**. The highest scoring attributes for this message were “easy to understand,” “believable,” and “motivates individuals to act.”



WHO IT RESONATES WITH

Preference for this message is relatively equal across all groups.

RESUME SCREENING

An estimated 41% of US adults have delayed or avoided medical care because of the pandemic. This may result in advanced disease and early deaths. Talk to your doctor about safely resuming care and next steps.

WHY IT RESONATES

This statement did not resonate as well as the previous three messages, but it did rate highest among all COVID-19-focused messages. The message clearly explains the **risks of postponing screening** and emphasizes the importance of resuming care. The highest scoring attributes for this message were “easy to understand,” “believable,” and “creates urgency.”



WHO IT RESONATES WITH

- Gay and bisexual individuals