

Plain language summary

NCRI Report ‘Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on cancer incidence, stage at diagnosis, mortality and 1-year survival in Ireland’

Report – Assessing the impact of Covid-19 on cancer in Ireland

The COVID-19 pandemic changed almost every part of our health system, and cancer care was no exception. This report from the National Cancer Registry of Ireland (NCRI) describes cancer diagnosis, treatment and survival across the country during the COVID-19 period, and early impact on cancer outcomes.

NCRI Data

The NCRI is the definitive source of cancer data in Ireland, collecting data on every new case of cancer since 1994. We collect information from every hospital and cancer service in the country, public hospitals and private hospitals, and our data is used by government leaders, scientists and healthcare workers to understand and manage how cancer affects our communities and find ways to reduce its impact.

For this study, we examined how many people were diagnosed with cancer during and after the pandemic, the stage at which cancers were found, how many people died from cancer, and how many survived at least one year after diagnosis.

What we found

- The data does not show a consistent rise in cancers diagnosed at late-stage (after the cancer has spread to other areas of the body) following the pandemic.
- Survival rates for all cancer sites in 2020–2021 remained in line with previous years.
- In spring 2020, the number of new cancer diagnoses dropped by 27% compared to previous years.
- Most of the biggest drops were seen in the four most common cancers: breast, colorectal, prostate, and lung.
- The system recovered swiftly, and by 2022, the number of diagnosed cases was back to expected levels.

Early-stage detection dropped temporarily

Fewer cancers were diagnosed in 2020 at early stage (before the cancer has progressed) as people were hesitant to attend appointments, GP visits were now phone calls rather than face to face, and screening services were paused. Most of the reduction was in the four most common sites, breast, colorectal, prostate, and lung.

But cancer services were reconfigured quickly during the pandemic (e.g., the use of the private hospitals) and swiftly returned to normal service after the pandemic. And the data shows that there was no clear rise in late-stage cancers (cancers that have spread to other areas of the body) once services resumed after the pandemic. This suggests that cancer services were protected during the pandemic and recovered quickly afterwards.

Cancer deaths and survival similar to previous years

When differences in patient age and cancer stage were taken into account, there was no evidence of worse outcomes during or after the pandemic.

The number of deaths from cancer increased slightly in 2020–2022, but this increase was in line with expected trends. Crucially, survival after diagnosis, including the likelihood of living at least one year after cancer is found, remained similar in 2020 and 2021 to previous years.

No clear evidence to date of lasting harm to cancer patients

The pandemic caused temporary disruptions in cancer diagnosis, especially in 2020. However, most services recovered quickly, and there was no clear evidence to date of lasting harm to cancer patients.

While disruptions to diagnostic testing including screening delays did affect early detection (an initial drop in numbers detected in spring 2020) by 2022, most people were being diagnosed and treated as before, and overall cancer outcomes remained stable. This is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of our health system, and to the commitment of healthcare professionals who ensured cancer patients continued to receive care under unprecedented strain.

Continuing to monitor the data and underlying trends

So far, the evidence gives cause for reassurance: Ireland's cancer outcomes stayed strong through one of the most difficult periods in modern healthcare.

The NCRI will continue to monitor cancer trends closely to detect any delayed effects that may emerge over time. By gathering and analysing high-quality national data, the NCRI helps ensure that cancer services in Ireland are prepared, not just for today's challenges, but for those still to come.

The NCRI – one of the leading Registries in Europe

The NCRI is the State Agency responsible for collecting and analysing cancer data, to inform policy, patient care and planning services for Ireland.

The NCRI is the definitive source of cancer data in Ireland. NCRI data informs policy and planning, enabling professionals and services to observe trends and predict future requirements. NCRI data helps to improve cancer care and cancer outcomes in Ireland.