Cancer screening in the COVID-19 pandemic; Development of early diagnostic strategies

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ABSTRACT

Aim: Early diagnosis is very important in some cancers such as breast, cervical and colorectal. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely disrupted cancer screening programs in many countries. In this study, it is aimed to contribute to the literature on this subject by reviewing the status of local cancer screenings during the pandemic period.

Methods: This retrospective study includes the 114.727 people in the risky group for cancer screening determined in Bolu, Turkey as two groups. During 2017-2019 years was determined as pre-pandemic group while the year of 2020 was the pandemic group. Data about patients’ results of smear / HPV (Human Papilloma Virus), fecal occult blood test (FOBT) and mammography had analyzed and compared with chi-square test.

Results: For all of the screening strategies, smear / HPV, FOBT and mammography, mean of screening cases, positive cases and biopsies had significantly decreased (p<0.05), but there was no statistically difference for mean of definitive diagnoses about all of these cancers even if it has been decreased between two groups.

Conclusion: The results of our study show that cancer screening processes are significantly disrupted during the pandemic period. Therefore, it is important to develop new screening strategies for the uninterrupted execution of cancer screening programs, especially during pandemic periods. However, we believe in the necessity of supporting studies with larger patient groups.

Key words: Cancer screening, early detection of cancer, primary health institution, COVID-19.

Introduction

One of every sixth deaths in the world and every fifth deaths in our country is due to cancer [1,2]. Today, 30-50% of cancer can be prevented by avoiding risk factors and applying evidence-based prevention strategies. Many cancers are more likely to be cured if diagnosed early and treated appropriately by the help of screening methods [3]. According to the current periodic guidelines in our country, three cancer types as breast, cervical and colorectal tumors are being recommended for screening by World Health Organization (WHO). While mammography is being used every 2 years for the breast cancer screening program in women between the ages of 40-69, smear / HPV testing every 5 years for women aged 30-65 as cervical cancer screening. About colorectal cancers for men and women aged 50-70 years, a FOBT every 2 years, a rectosigmoidoscopy every 5 years or a colonoscopy every 10 years are being recommended [4]. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted the cancer screening
programmers in many countries [5-7]. To need using of health care resources correctly and immediately, many cancer organizations have advocated discontinuing cancer screening services to patients. [8-9] Also during the pandemic, people in the risk group of cancer avoided going to health institutions to get this service.[10]

In this study, it is aimed to contribute to the literature on this subject by reviewing the status of local cancer screenings during the pandemic period. For this purpose, we compared the cancer screenings made through the cancer early diagnosis center for 4 years between 2017-2019 before the pandemic and the cancer screenings in 2020, when the pandemic was effective, and discussed the solutions for the problems that emerged.

**Materials and methods**

This retrospective study includes 114,727 people in the risk group who are included in the cancer screening programs determined by the Ministry of Health and applied to the cancer early diagnosis center and family health centers in Bolu within the last 4 years. The years 2017-2019 were determined as the pre-pandemic group, and the year 2020 as the pandemic group. The researches were carried out in the cancer unit of Bolu Provincial Health Directorate, Public Health Services Presidency. The study was approved by the local ethics committee (decision number: 2021/70).

The patients' smear/HPV (Human Papilloma Virus), fecal occult blood test (FOBT) and mammography results were analyzed and compared between the groups.

The analysis of the data obtained as a result of the research was performed with the SPSS statistical package program (PSS 15.0; IBM Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Descriptive data were given as frequency, arithmetic mean, standard deviation, median, and crosstabs. Categorical data were analyzed with chi-square. p<0.05 was considered statistically significant.

**Results**

The mean of screening, positive cases and biopsy done during the pandemic were significantly lower than the pre-pandemic

| Table 1. Analysis of pre-pandemic and pre-pandemic cancer screening tests of the groups. |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Parameters                        | Smear/HPV                   | FOBT                   | Mammography                  | p value */ Chi-square value |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Mean of screening cases           |                             |                        |                             |                              |
| Pre-pandemic¹                    | 19570 (%40.4)               | 14.726 (%30.4)         | 14.174 (%29.2)              | 0.000* / 23.349              |
| Pandemic²                        | 13.158 (%67.2)              | 10.091 (%68.5)         | 9.879 (%69.7)               |                              |
|                                  | 6.412 (%32.8)               | 4.635 (%31.5)          | 4.295 (%30.3)               |                              |
| Mean of positive cases            |                             |                        |                             |                              |
| Pre-pandemic¹                    | 232 (%35.3)                 | 133 (%20.2)            | 293 (%44.5)                 | 0.000* / 23.594              |
| Pandemic²                        | 156 (%67.2)                 | 109 (%82.0)            | 170 (%58.0)                 |                              |
|                                  | 76 (%32.8)                  | 24 (%18.0)             | 123 (%42.0)                 |                              |
| Mean of biopsies                  |                             |                        |                             |                              |
| Pre-pandemic¹                    | 178 (%72.1)                 | 42 (%17.0)             | 27 (%10.9)                  | 0.005* / 10.422              |
| Pandemic²                        | 124 (%69.7)                 | 39 (%92.9)             | 22 (%81.5)                  |                              |
|                                  | 54 (%30.3)                  | 3 (%7.1)               | 5 (%18.5)                   |                              |
| Mean of definitive diagnosis cases|                             |                        |                             |                              |
| Pre-pandemic¹                    | 29 (%65.9)                  | 5 (%11.4)              | 10 (%22.7)                  | 0.173 / 3.514                |
| Pandemic²                        | 18 (%62.1)                  | 5 (%100)               | 8 (%80.0)                   |                              |
|                                  | 11 (%37.9)                  | 0 (%0)                 | 2 (%20.0)                   |                              |

* p>0.05. *Chi-square test. ¹Pre-pandemic: during years of 2017-2019. ²Pandemic: 2020.
period ($p<0.05$). On the other hand, there is no significant difference between the mean of people diagnosed with definitive cancer before and after the pandemic ($p>0.05$) (Table 1).

The average of cancer screening in the last 3 years (2017-2019) before the pandemic; in 2020 while smear/HPV cancer screenings decreased by 51.2%; positive referral mean 51.2%; the person who had a biopsy decreased by 56.5%. And while the number of cancer screenings performed in primary care decreased by 71.9%. About FOBT while its cancer screenings decreased by 54.1%; positive referral mean 77.9%; the person who had a biopsy decreased by 92.3%. The number of FOBT performed in primary care decreased by 64.2%. While mammography scans decreased by 56.5%; positive referral mean 27.6%; the

| Table 2. Annual overall cancer screening rates in the study (2017-2020). |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Years | Parameters | 1* | % | 2** | % | TOTAL | % |
| 2017 | Smear/HPV | 7457 | 54.20 | 7172 | 52.13 | 14629 | 106.33 |
| | FOBT | 6737 | 20.46 | 1893 | 5.75 | 8630 | 26.21 |
| | Mammography | 5245 | 19.97 | 5568 | 21.20 | 10813 | 41.16 |
| 2018 | Smear/HPV | 7462 | 53.40 | 5519 | 39.50 | 12981 | 92.90 |
| | FOBT | 7666 | 22.92 | 2203 | 6.59 | 9869 | 29.50 |
| | Mammography | 4106 | 15.31 | 5163 | 19.25 | 9269 | 34.56 |
| 2019 | Smear/HPV | 6479 | 45.15 | 5385 | 37.53 | 11864 | 82.68 |
| | FOBT | 8957 | 25.67 | 2818 | 8.08 | 11775 | 33.74 |
| | Mammography | 4276 | 15.36 | 5279 | 18.97 | 9555 | 34.33 |
| 2020 | Smear/HPV | 2010 | 13.77 | 4402 | 30.16 | 6412 | 43.94 |
| | FOBT | 2792 | 7.80 | 1843 | 5.15 | 4635 | 12.96 |
| | Mammography | 1299 | 4.58 | 2996 | 10.57 | 4295 | 15.15 |

*Primary Health Care Institutions and Organizations. **Second and Third Level Health Institutions and Organizations.

HPV: Human papilloma virus. FOBT: Fecal occult blood test.

| Table 3. The number of applications to the diagnosis center after the screening of the patients whose 1st stage screening results were positive. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Years | Parameters | Number of scans | Positive number | Patient undergoing biopsy | Patient with a definitive cancer diagnosis |
| 2017 | Smear/HPV | 14629 | 151 | 133 | 8 |
| | FOBT | 8630 | 105 | 40 | 13 |
| | Mammography | 10813 | 164 | 26 | 16 |
| 2018 | Smear/HPV | 12981 | 154 | 111 | 33 |
| | FOBT | 9869 | 44 | 25 | 0 |
| | Mammography | 9269 | 144 | 15 | 4 |
| 2019 | Smear/HPV | 11864 | 163 | 129 | 12 |
| | FOBT | 11775 | 177 | 52 | 1 |
| | Mammography | 9555 | 202 | 24 | 4 |
| 2020 | Smear/HPV | 6412 | 76 | 54 | 11 |
| | FOBT | 4635 | 24 | 3 | 0 |
| | Mammography | 4295 | 123 | 5 | 2 |

HPV: Human papilloma virus. FOBT: Fecal occult blood test.
A person who had a biopsy decreased by 77.3%. The number of mammography in primary care decreased by 71.4% (Table 2, 3). We also compared the average numbers of primary care cancer screening and total cancer screening in the pandemic period (2020) with the pre-pandemic period (2017-2019) as box graphics (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Comparison of the average numbers of cancer screening between pandemic (2020) and the pre-pandemic years (2017-2019). FOBT: Fecal occult blood test; HPV. Human papilloma virus.

**Discussion**

Screening programs for especially breast, cervical and colorectal cancers which are most common ones can be controlled by cancer screening strategies [11]. If any retardation about treatment like six months, that may be caused a progression to an incurable state for many cancers [12-14]. Also, many simulation model studies predict that the death rates due to the cancer may be higher than expected in future [6]. COVID-19 pandemic interrupted many cancer screening programs like lung cancer about decrease of screening cases and increase of nodule detection with a high probability of malignancy [15,16]. However, a huge number of patients did not go to the hospital because of the curfew, fear of infection etc.[17] This study revealed that the mean of screening case, positive cases and biopsies during the pandemic were significantly lower than pre-pandemic period. The temporary cessation of national cancer screening programs and the redirection of all health care providers to the pandemic, as well as the fact that patients are less likely to go to primary care due to the pandemic, may be some reasons of the interruption [18,19]. Also, the redirection of most routine health services to COVID-19 has led to disruption of non-COVID primary care services and even the complete cessation of some screening programs [20]. In our study, it was shown that the number of cancer screenings decreased by half compared to the previous three years. When the patients who were diagnosed with definite cancer by biopsy were evaluated, although the number of those who underwent biopsy in Smear/HPV decreased by 50%, with its correlation about FOBT and mammography, those with a definite cancer diagnosis showed a decrease by one third. The main reason for this may be that patients apply to non-primary care centers.
especially in the presence of symptoms. Also, we thought that the evaluation of patient in these applications leads to more effective biopsies and diagnosis.

The rescan start strategy needs a very capacity in a short time. If screening capacity is increased by 33%, the 6-month accumulation will still take 18 months to clear, but this will significantly reduce the overall number diagnosing of cancers [21]. In cases where screening programs are interrupted, it is important that participation rates return to expected rates as soon as possible and catch-up screening strategies are in place to reduce negative results [6]. Therefore, the capture scans that will start during the normalization period will increase the screening capacities and spread the screening load over time.

Strengthening the counseling service of family physicians can speed up diagnosis without burdening secondary care services and saving time by coordination between primary care and tertiary hospitals [20]. On the other hand, screening centers to be established in institutions providing 2nd and 3rd level health services as a part of catching screening will provide the opportunity for early diagnosis for patients in the risk group who apply for any reason. We should also perform a priority assessment to identify patients at risk of inadequate or delayed diagnosis of cancer [22]. This group may include those who are more likely to cancel or postpone their screening program visits, or those who are in the risk group. Moreover, our visits will raise awareness about screening and provide an opportunity to direct patients correctly.

Reducing the cancer screening upper limit age will lead to a reduction in the population to be screened and to the screening of the effective treatment age at which the surveillance will be extended [23]. In addition, prolonging the screening intervals to remain at an effective level will facilitate screening and increase the effectiveness of screening by reducing the number of people per time in the population.

Our study is limited to the Bolu as a local country so these findings should be confirmed in other regions where pandemic responses may be different.

**Conclusion**

The results of our study show that cancer screening processes deteriorate significantly during the pandemic period. For this reason, it is important to develop new strategies to minimize cancer cases that are likely to increase in the future due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to conduct cancer screening programs uninterruptedly. In addition, we believe it is necessary to support the results of our study with larger patient groups.

**Funding:** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical statement:** The study was approved by the local ethics committee (decision number: 2021/70).

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