COVID-19 pandemic impact on gynecologic cancer treatment pathways in a Finnish tertiary center

Objective: COVID-19 and new guidelines during the pandemic affected the gynecologic cancer treatment pathways, resulting in recorded delays and modifications in the treatment protocols. The aim of this study was to determine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in one of the major gynecologic cancer care centers in Finland, Tampere University Hospital (TAUH).

Materials and methods: Our retrospective register study included 909 patients that were new gynecologic cancers cases (uterine, cervical, vulvar, vaginal, or ovarian) referred to the TAUH Gynecologic Oncology Outpatient Clinic between March 17th, 2018, and March 15th, 2022. The patients were divided into two separate groups depending on their time of referral: time before COVID (March 17th, 2018, to March 15th, 2020), and during COVID (March 16th, 2020, to March 15th, 2022). These groups were compared in terms of patient characteristics, different cancer types and stages, symptoms, and treatment methods.

Results: During the COVID-19 pandemic, patients generally suffered from cancer symptoms longer ($p<0.003$) and were more likely to be overweight ($p=0.035$). The improved multidisciplinary team meeting (MDT) gave the patients faster route to their first intervention during COVID ($p<0.05$). An insignificant shift towards non-surgical first interventions and non-curative intent was seen during COVID, but the MDT treatment plans were mostly implemented accordingly on both eras. No decrease was seen in the number of new gynecologic cancer cases, and the one-year overall survival remained the same in both groups.

Conclusion: Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic did not significantly alter treatment pathways in gynecologic cancer care at TAUH. The number of new patients and given treatments remained relatively stable. During COVID, the access from referral to cancer treatment was significantly accelerated which is likely confounded by changes to the MDT protocol made in early 2021.