



Belgian Cancer Registry

Strong decline in new cancer diagnoses in April due to corona crisis in Belgium

Cancer care in Belgium was heavily affected by the corona pandemic and the necessary measures taken by the government. On March 14, 2020, all non-essential consultations, medical tests, and interventions were temporarily halted. Around this same time, population screening for breast, cervical, and colon cancer were likewise stopped.

Thanks to the expedited delivery of data by the laboratories for pathological anatomy, the Belgian Cancer Registry was able to make an initial estimate of the decline in the number of new cancer diagnoses.

Each month in Belgium, there is an average of 5725 new cancer diagnoses expected*. Recent analyses by the Belgian Cancer Registry show that, after an initial rapid decline in the month of March, the number of new cancer diagnoses in the month of April 2020 declined by nearly half (44%) compared to April 2019. For men, this was a decline of 43%, and for women, 45%. By mid-April, the numbers began to increase again, and we hope that this increase has continued.

Age and tumour type

Age and tumour type have a strong and specific effect upon the decline in diagnoses in April 2020. For people aged 65 and older, the risk group for corona, the decline was least prominent for patients aged 65 to 79 years (40%), compared to the strong decline of 51% for patients aged 80 and over. For children and adolescents up to 19 years of age, the decline is limited to 12%, for (young) adults (20-34 years old) the decline is 34%, and for patients between 35 and 64 years of age the decline is 45%.

Depending on the tumour type, the decline varies between 16% and 65%. The largest decrease is seen for both the least dangerous types of skin cancer (65%) as well as the most aggressive type, melanoma (61%). A strong decline is also noted for prostate cancer (52%). Lung cancer declined by 37%. The decline is smallest for pancreatic cancer (16%).

Population Screening

The temporary halt in population screening in mid-March influenced new diagnoses of the three cancer types: breast, cervical, and colon cancer. In April 2020, the number of colon cancer diagnoses declined by 48% for men and 55% for women. Specifically in the screening age group (50-74 years), the decline was 49% for men and 58% for women. Breast cancer showed a decrease of 48% for all ages and 51% in the screening age group (50-69 years of age). The effect was smallest for cervical cancer; in the screening age group (24-64 years of age) and for all ages combined, the decline was 20%.

Stichting Kankerregister S.O.N.
Fondation Registre du Cancer F.U.P.
Stiftung Krebsregister G.E.M.S.T.

Koningsstraat 215
Rue Royale 215
1210 Brussel / Bruxelles
T +32 2 250 10 10
F +32 2 250 10 11

www.kankerregister.org
www.registreducancer.org

Decline

The cause of this decline is likely multifactorial. Owing to the corona crisis, people with symptoms may have delayed contacting a general practitioner or specialist, and, as such, fewer patients were referred to hospitals for further diagnostic testing. Additionally, the temporary halt in population screening for breast, cervical, and colon cancer until mid-May (breast cancer in Flanders until June 28), together with delayed diagnostic testing and an adapted approach to care in hospitals, will also have played an important role.

The numbers from April demonstrate that a large proportion of the expected new cancer diagnoses were, at that moment, still not made. The important message remains to seek advice from a doctor if you have persistent symptoms, to avoid a possible negative outcome due to delayed diagnosis and treatment.

An increase in diagnoses began in mid-April, likely as a result of awareness campaigns from the health care sector, patient groups, and the government. This hopeful trend will be followed-up in the coming months. Managing the backlog of delayed diagnoses will undoubtedly result in increased pressure on hospitals.

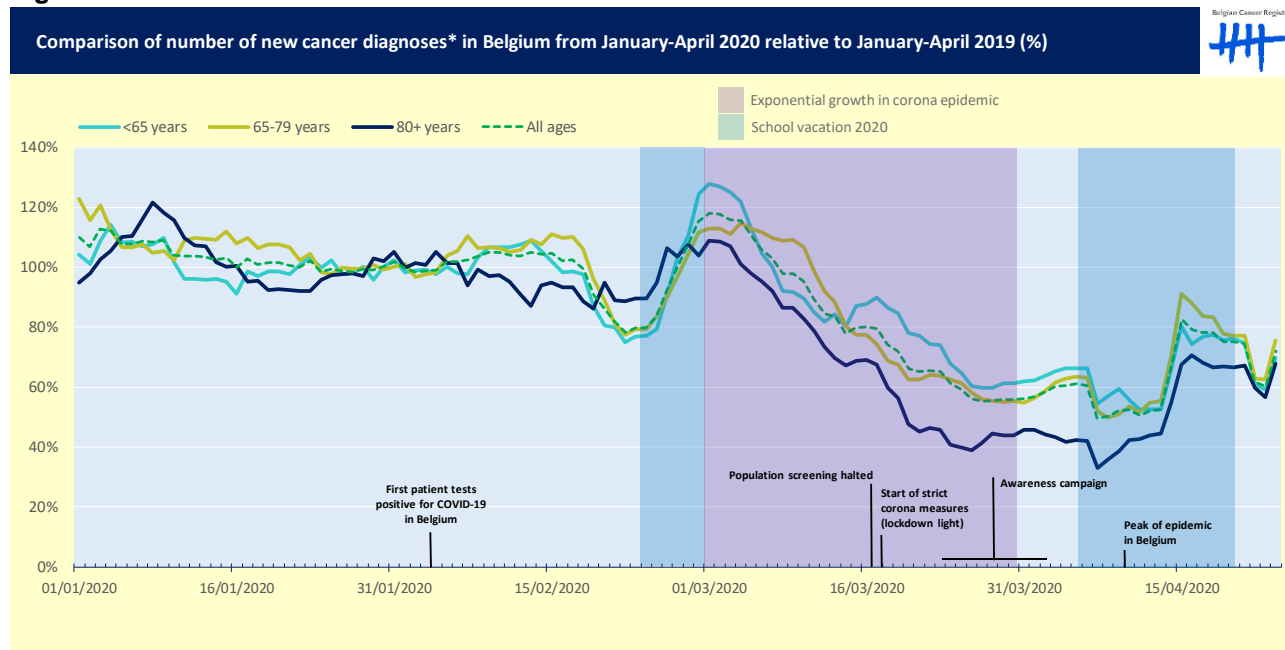
The Belgian Cancer Registry, together with the involved stakeholders, will track and report the development in new diagnoses, as well as the effect of treatment strategies and outcomes for patients during the coming months and years.

*all cancers with the exception of non-melanoma skin cancer

Contact: Katia Emmerechts 0032 477 273 163



Figure 1

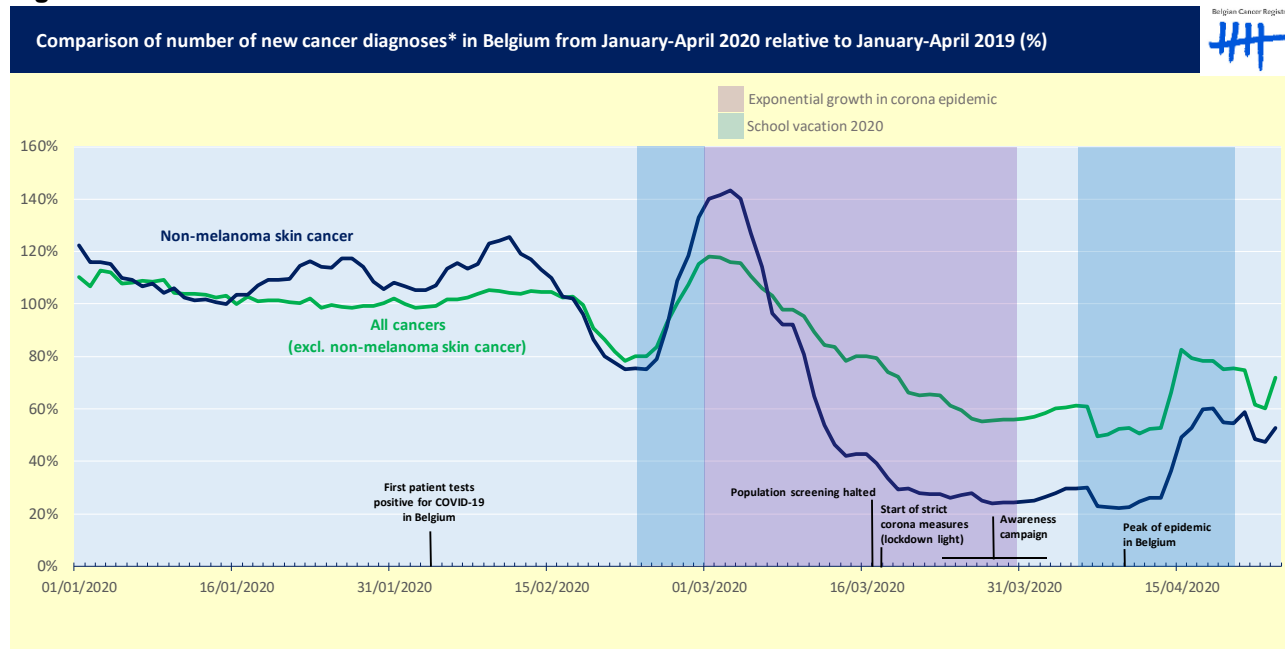


* All cancers except non-melanoma skin cancer, based on data from laboratories for pathological anatomy

Explanation of timeline:

- Population screening halted: temporary halt in population screening for breast, cervical, and colon cancer
- Awareness campaign: Campaign from health care sector, patient groups and government. Call directed to the general public to consult a physician if experiencing symptoms.
- Peak of epidemic in Belgium: Peak in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Belgium.

Figure 2



Explanation of timeline:

- Number of new cancer diagnoses based on data from laboratories for pathological anatomy
- Population screening halted: temporary halt in population screening for breast, cervical, and colon cancer
- Awareness campaign: Campaign from health care sector, patient groups and government. Call directed to the general public to consult a physician if experiencing symptoms.
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Figure 3

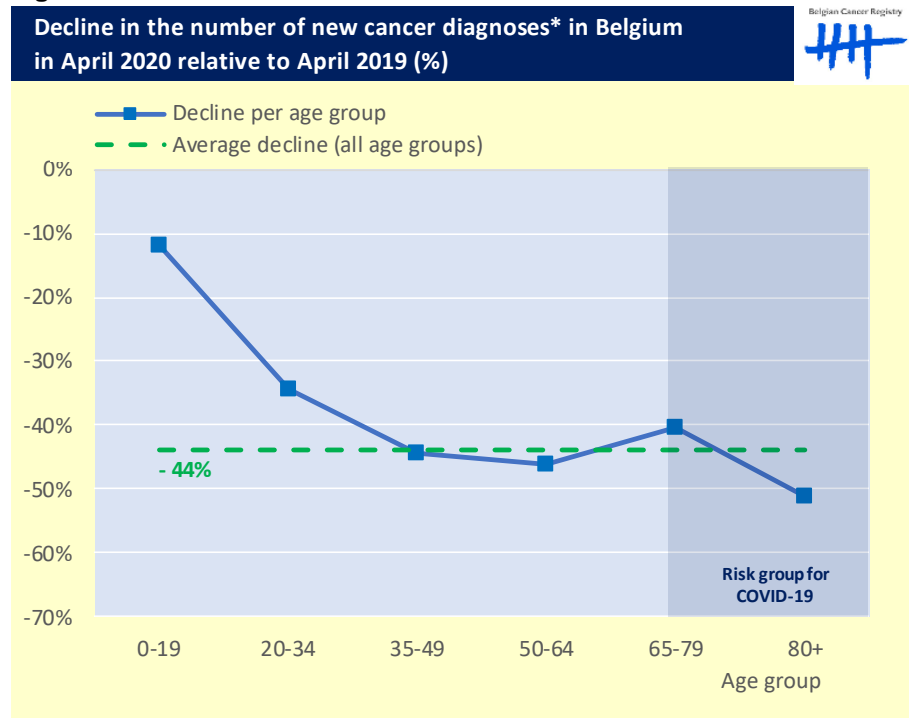


Figure 4

