Cancer? COVID-19? I can fight against both!
A guide for cancer patients against COVID-19 in Mexico

By: Kenji Lopez

When I heard that COVID-19 represented a “double risk” for the patients diagnosed with cancer I knew there was a lot to do. My name is Kenji Lopez, Founder and Director of Cancer Warriors of Mexico, and since 2013 I am committed to fight against cancer. First as a relative of a patient, then as a volunteer, and then through the NGO I founded, which has a clear objective: to fight on behalf of the rights of cancer patients. From 2016 to 2019 we fought to amend Mexican legislation to support children with cancer in our country, and we did it! But that is another story.

Why a cancer patient has a double risk against COVID-19? The answer is simple: unfortunately, cancer patients are among the most vulnerable group of people and susceptible to the spread of the new coronavirus due to their immune system is weakened.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, this group of patients, their relatives and caregivers have expressed countless concerns and questions regarding the new coronavirus. The disinformation and posts from unreliable sources of COVID-19 could be “harmless” for a group of the population. However, for an oncological patient, who was already fighting cancer before starting the global fight against coronavirus, the effect of misinformation is appalling.

At the end of the last week we launched a survey on all the social networks of our NGO: “Are you a cancer patient? (or relative or caregiver) What is your bigger concern or challenge regarding #COVID-19? The answers did not wait. After receiving more than 200 comments -via Facebook, Instagram and Twitter- we concluded that the two main concerns are: 1. The interruption of cancer treatments (that imply the progression of the disease) and 2. Being exposed to COVID-19 by attending appointments or treatments at hospitals.

The concerns were clear, now they had to be answered. We took on the task of making an exhaustive research on platforms of international organizations and mainly, we conducted interviews with oncologists and hematologists.

“The child and adolescent with cancer should continue their treatment following the instructions of their oncologist or hematologist, taking care in not be infected by COVID-19”, was the recommendation shared by the President of the Mexican Association of Onco-Hematology Pediatric, the renowned Oncologist Marta Zapata Tarres.
Dr. Zapata supports and agrees with international institutions and organizations who states that: “Cancer patients should continue their treatments under the supervision of their oncologists or hematologists, who should clarify doubts and will request to their patients to follow their recommendations.” This is, in summary, the recommendation issued by the American Cancer Society (ACC), the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) and the Spanish Association Against Cancer (AECC).

Cancer? COVID-19? We can fight against both! And I say we all can due that this fight needs all of us!

With no doubt the best weapon in this war is the reliable information. Enlisted below are the main recommendations issued by the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC), which is located in Geneva, Switzerland, for cancer patients against COVID-19 (in addition to constant hand washing and maintenance social distance):

1. Reduce to a single caregiver to avoid exposure from contact with more people.
2. Avoid, as much as possible, the use of public transportation (if its use is essential, use protection for your hands, mouth, eyes and keep a distance from other passengers).
3. Minimize the time in hospitals in case of routine consultations or studies.
4. Get enough sleep, eat healthy, and exercise if possible.
5. Keep your distance in case that other family members have COVID-19 symptoms.

Today the entire world has risen in arms to fight this pandemic and today the same army is also with you! Cancer has not beaten us, and neither will COVID-19. Let’s heed the recommendations and, we will win!

We are all in this together!