CANCER SUPPORT COMMUNITY
COMMUNITY IS STRONGER THAN CANCER

GILDA'S CLUB

The Benefits of Earlier Diagnosis: The Impact of Cancer Stage at Diagnosis on Patient Decision-Making, Financial Resilience, and Quality of Life

Key Findings

Earlier cancer diagnosis is associated with benefits in addition to survival. In this analysis of 3,445 individuals with solid tumors, earlier stage at diagnosis was associated with feeling more prepared to make decisions, more patient involvement in decision-making, less financial burden, and better quality of life with less symptom burden.

Purpose

Cancer stage at diagnosis is a critical predictor of survival; however, less is known about how stage at diagnosis relates to patient-centered outcomes across the cancer experience.

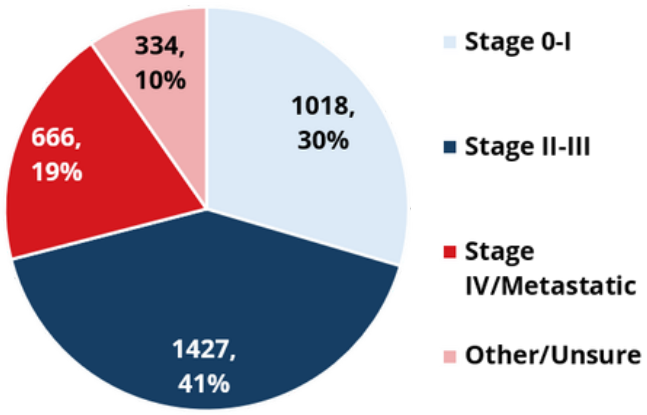
Using retrospective data from Cancer Support Community's **Cancer Experience Registry (CER)**, we examined whether stage at diagnosis was associated with:

- **Treatment knowledge and decision preparedness**
- **Patient involvement in treatment decision-making**
- **Financial toxicity and financial coping strategies**
- **Symptoms, functioning, and quality of life**

Methods

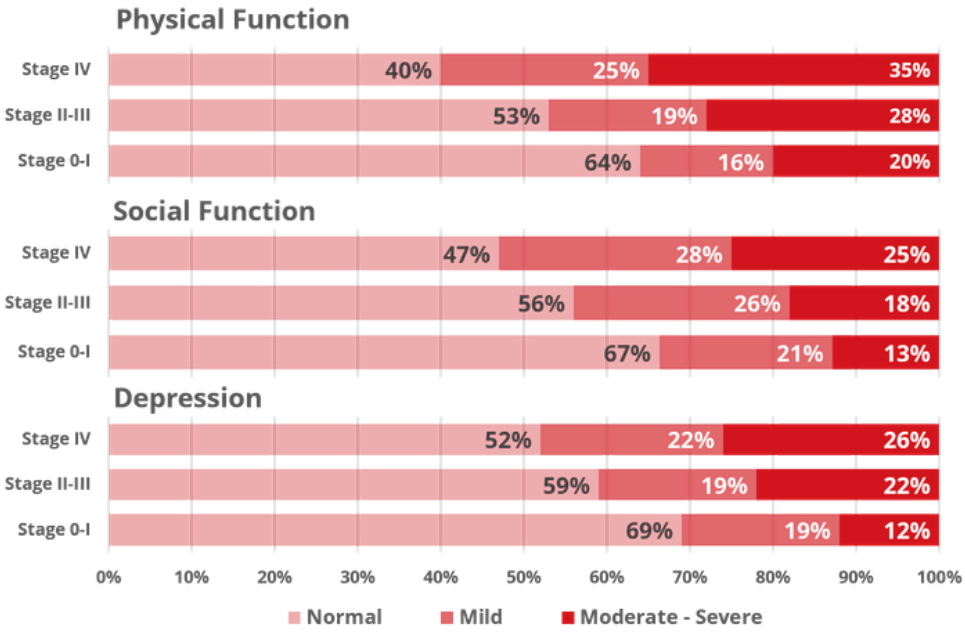
- The analysis included **3,445 patients and survivors** with solid tumors who completed the baseline CER survey between October 2021 and March 2026.
- Participants were grouped by stage at diagnosis (see Figure below).
- Outcomes were compared across stages.

Stage at Diagnosis



What do you need to know?

1 Patients Diagnosed at Later Stages Reported Worse Outcomes



PROMIS-29 T-scores are standardized to population mean and categorized as normal, mild, moderate, or severe based on the score's distance from the mean (moderate-severe ≥ 1 SD)

Patients diagnosed at a later stages reported higher symptom burden, including depression, anxiety, fatigue, pain, and sleep disturbance, and lower functioning, for physical, social, and cognitive functioning.

The largest differences were observed for physical function, social function, and depression.

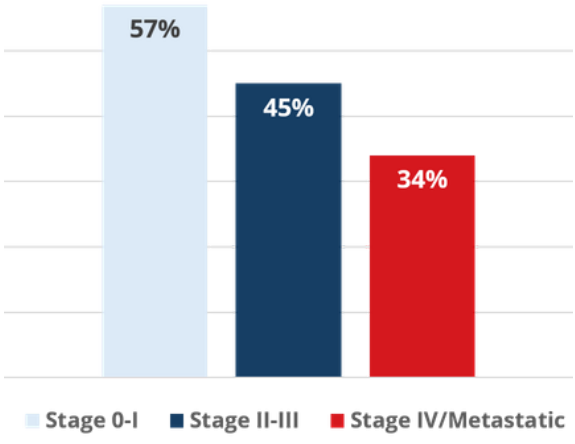
2 Patient Agency in Treatment Decisions Declined with Advancing Stage at Diagnosis

Patients diagnosed with later-stage disease were more likely to report shared or provider-directed decision-making.

Earlier-stage diagnosis was associated with more patient-led decision-making, while patient-led decision-making declined as stage advanced.

While decision-making preferences vary among patients, this pattern suggests that patients may have less agency in decision-making when diagnosed at later stages. Ensuring that all patients have adequate information, time, and support to participate in decisions according to their preferences may help preserve agency.

Patient-led decision-making by stage at diagnosis



Patient-led: "I make the decisions about which treatment I will receive" or "I make the final decision about my treatment after seriously considering my cancer care team's opinion." Provider-led: "My cancer care team makes the final decision about which treatment will be used, but seriously considers my opinion" or "I leave all decisions regarding my treatment to my cancer care team."

3 Financial Toxicity Was More Pronounced Among Patients with Late-Stage Diagnosis

Financial toxicity can compound the emotional and practical burden of a cancer diagnosis, negatively affecting well-being and quality of life. Greater financial strain has been associated with increased anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbance, as well as poorer social functioning.

Although roughly half of participants reported no cancer-related financial toxicity, financial burden differed by stage:

- Patients diagnosed at Stage 0-I were more likely to report no financial toxicity: Stage 0-I: 60%, Stage II-III: 51%, Stage IV: 47%
- Patients diagnosed at Stage IV were more likely to report moderate financial toxicity: Stage 0-I: 14%, Stage II-III: 21%, Stage IV: 26%

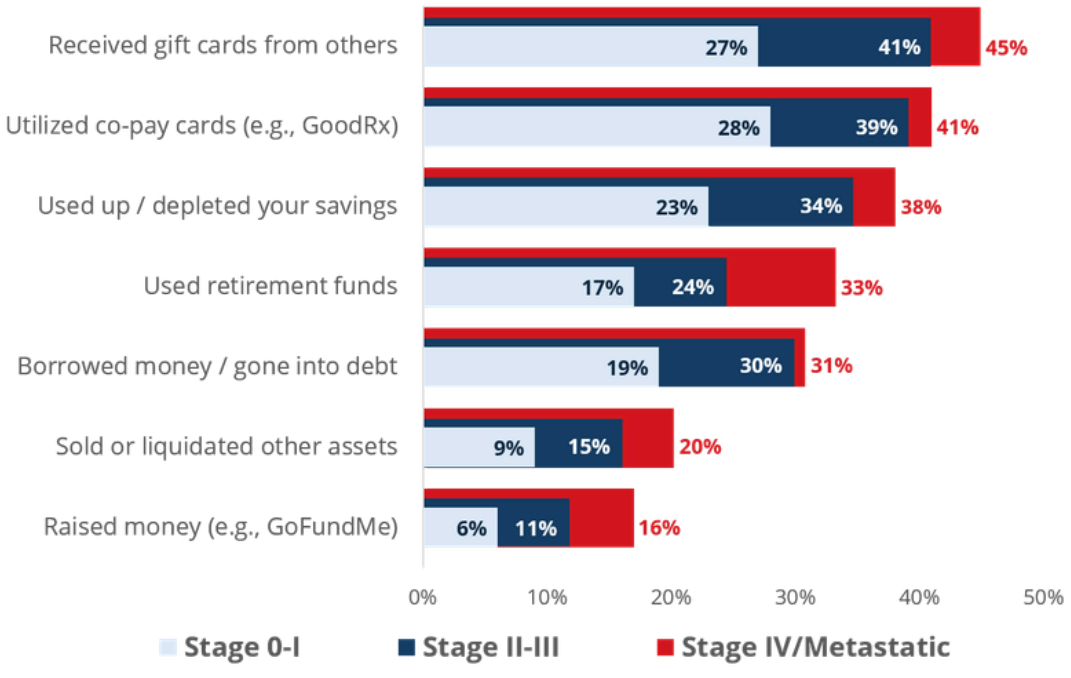
Financial toxicity was measured using the COST-FACIT, with scores categorized as follows: none (≥26), mild (15–25), moderate (1–14), and severe (0).

These findings reinforce the importance of integrating financial navigation and supportive care early, particularly for patients with advanced disease.

Higher financial toxicity is also likely to require the use of more financial mitigation strategies.

Those diagnosed at Stage IV were around 2X as likely as those diagnosed at Stage 0-I to use retirement funds, sell or liquidate assets, and use fundraising platforms.

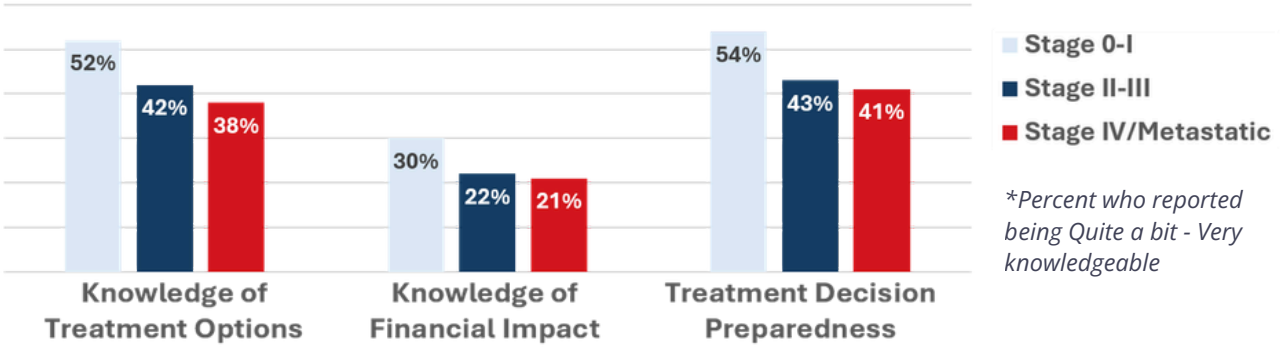
Financial Mitigation Strategies by Stage of Diagnosis



Additionally, 2% of those diagnosed at Stage 0-I and 3% of those diagnosed at Stage II-III or Stage I/V reported filing for bankruptcy due to the costs of their cancer care.

4 Later-Stage Diagnosis Was Associated with Lower Treatment Knowledge and Decision Preparedness

A consistent linear relationship was observed between advancing stage and reduced knowledge and preparedness for treatment decision-making, with Stage 0-I reporting being the most knowledgeable and prepared for decision-making.*



*Percent who reported being Quite a bit - Very knowledgeable

These findings suggest that patients diagnosed with advanced disease may require additional communication, education, and decision-support resources at diagnosis.

What are the Implications for Clinical Practice and Policy?

Earlier Detection Improves More Than Survival

Evidence-based cancer screening and timely diagnostic evaluation remain essential public health priorities. Earlier diagnosis may provide additional benefits by supporting:

- **Improved decision preparedness**
- **Greater patient engagement**
- **Reduced financial hardship**
- **Better long-term quality of life and quality of life**

Support Is Needed Across the Cancer Continuum and Can Vary by Stage

Patients diagnosed with later-stage disease may require enhanced support to:

- Understand treatment options and expected outcomes
- Participate meaningfully in shared decision-making
- Anticipate and manage treatment-related costs
- Access financial navigation resources

Policy Priorities

Policies and healthcare systems that improve equitable access to screening, diagnostic follow-up, and supportive services are critical to reducing cancer morbidity and mortality.

The benefits of early detection also extend beyond survival: they include improving how patients experience, navigate, and live with cancer.

Sponsored by GRAIL | For more information, please contact research@cancersupportcommunity.org