

How Prior Authorization Harms Cancer Care

Results of a Nationwide Physician Survey, Dec. 2024

More than one million people in the U.S. receive radiation therapy each year to treat cancer and other diseases. Radiation oncologists — the doctors who provide this care — have shared the impact of prior authorization on their patients and clinics in a series of online surveys by the American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO). In the latest survey, conducted in the fall of 2024, more than 750 physicians from across the U.S. responded, representing both academic (47%) and private (51%) practices, in different types of communities (49% urban, 39% suburban, 13% rural). Survey findings make clear that restrictive prior authorization practices harm people with cancer and exacerbate the strain on clinic staff — and that the problem has grown worse in recent years. Key findings are below; for more information or to connect with ASTRO experts, visit astro.org/priorauthpress.

Prior authorization causes harm, even death, for people with cancer.

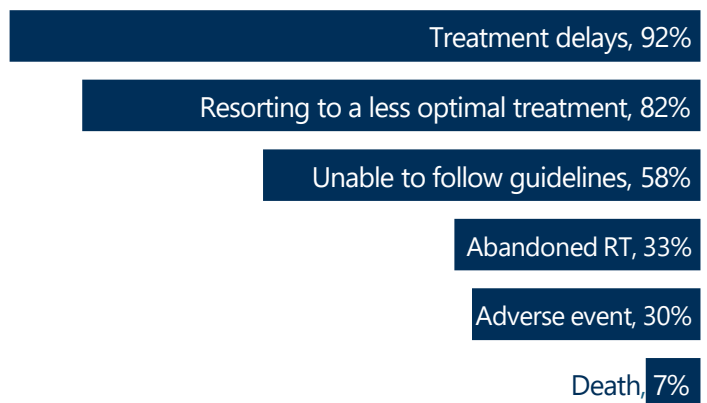
Nearly a third of the physician respondents (30%) say **prior authorization has caused adverse events** including **emergency room visits, hospitalization or permanent disability** for their patients, and 7% report that it has led or contributed to the **death of a patient** in their care.

Nearly all radiation oncologists (92%) report that **prior authorization causes treatment delays** for patients in their care. These doctors estimate that **more than a third of their patients**, on average (35%), experience treatment delays due to prior authorization.

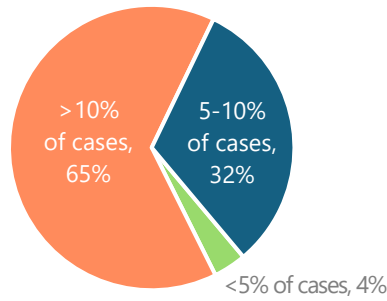
One-third of respondents (33%) said prior authorization has led to their patients **abandoning radiation treatment**, and that this happened for 1 in 10 patients on average (10.4%; n=191). A majority (58%) say prior authorization left them unable to adhere to established guidelines at some point.

More than 8 in 10 respondents (82%) say prior authorization has forced them to **resort to a less optimal treatment** than they originally prescribed. When asked how often this occurs, two-thirds of doctors say it happens in more than 10% of cases, up from one-third in ASTRO's 2019 survey:

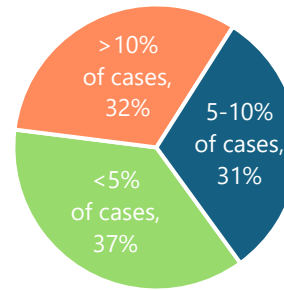
*Q: Has prior auth ever led/contributed to any of the following for patients in your care?
(n=730)*



2024



2019



2024: For what % of your patients have you used a different therapy due to prior auth restrictions or delays? (n=589);
 2019: In what portion of cases do you utilize a different therapy due to prior authorization delays? (n=624)

Prior authorization also **creates barriers to securing approvals for medicines** that are needed to help with the effects of cancer treatment.

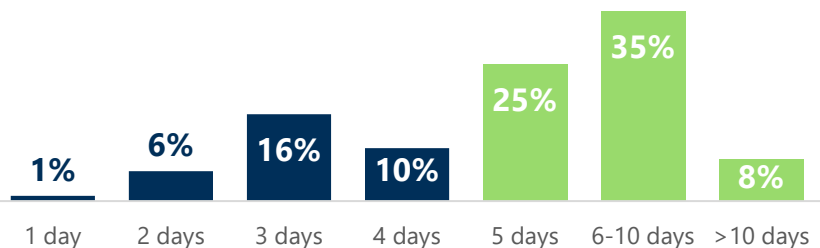
- ➔ Radiation oncologists report difficulty obtaining approvals for anti-nausea medications (23%), mucosal protectants (20%) and erectile dysfunction meds (18%), as well as topical prescription skincare (17%) and pain medicine (opiate pain meds 40%, non-opiate pain meds 10%) (n=721).

The problem of prior authorization is getting worse.

Patients face longer delays to radiation therapy treatments now than they did during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. More than two-thirds of these physician respondents (68%) said the average length of delay caused by prior authorization lasts 5 days or longer, up from 52% reporting similarly long delays in a September 2020 ASTRO survey.

Q: What is the average length of delay caused by prior auth for patients in your care?

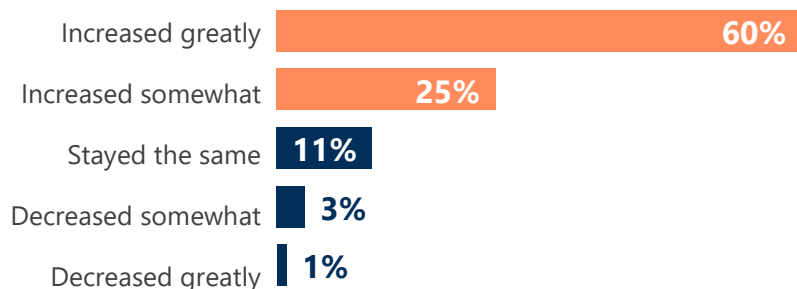
(n=636)



More than 8 in 10 doctors say the **prior authorization burden is growing worse**, reporting that it increased greatly (60%) or somewhat (25%) in the past three years:

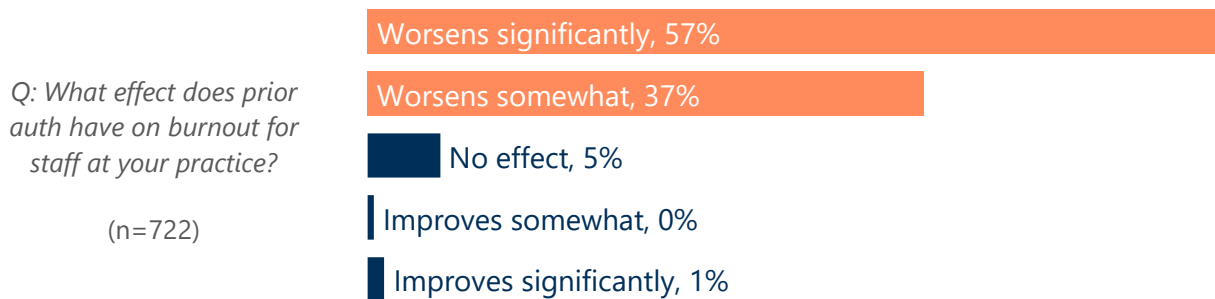
Q: In the past three years, how do you think the prior auth burden has changed?

(n=720)



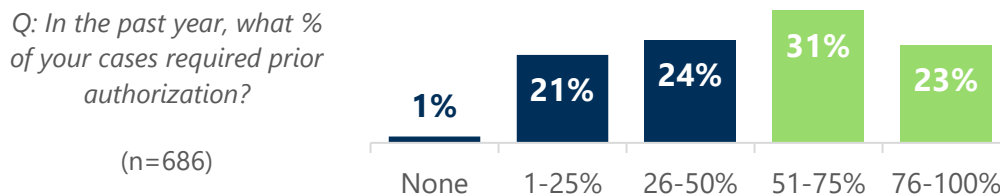
Prior authorization worsens the strain on cancer clinics and providers.

More than 9 in 10 radiation oncologists said **prior authorization worsens staff burnout** in their cancer clinics, either significantly (57%) or somewhat (37%).



4 in 5 physicians (80%) said prior authorization made it **necessary to reallocate staff time** to manage the process at their clinic, and 3 in 5 (64%) said they had to **hire additional staff**.

A majority of doctors (54%) said more than half of their cases require prior authorization approval, up from 51% in 2020 and 44% in 2019.

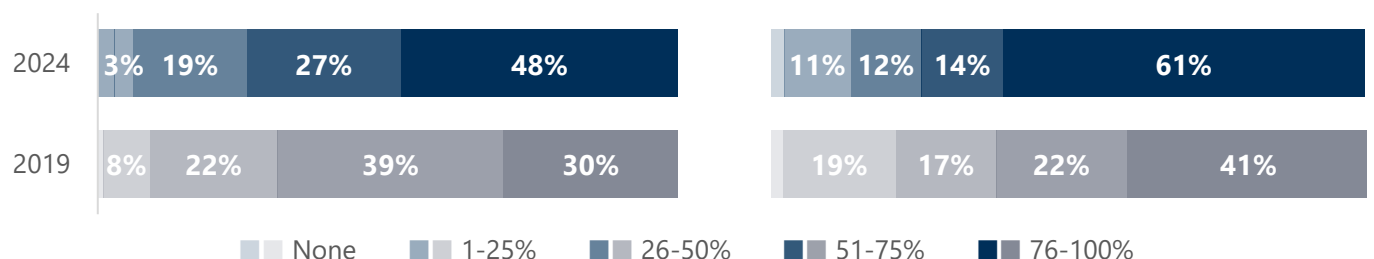


Rates of initial approvals and overturned denials are also up:

- ➔ Three-fourths (77%) of doctors in 2024 said more than half of their prior authorization requests are initially approved, up from 69% in ASTRO's 2019 survey. Similarly, three-fourths (76%) in 2024 said more than half of their denied requests are approved on appeal, up from 62% in 2019.
- ➔ On average, radiation oncologists report in 2024 that 71% of their prior authorization requests are initially approved, and 73% of denials are overturned on appeal.

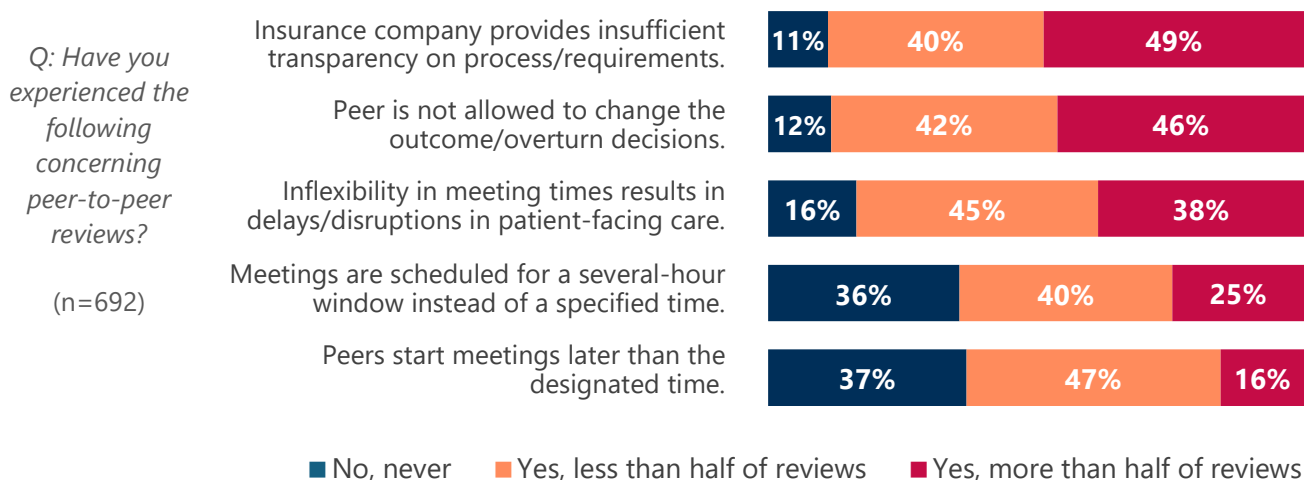
Q: What % of your prior auth requests are initially approved?
(2024 n=554; 2019 n=633)

Q: What % of your denied requests are approved on appeal?
(2024 n=588; 2019 n=632)



Just two-thirds (66%) of peer-to-peer consultations for radiation therapy treatments are performed by radiation oncologists, down slightly from 68% in 2020.

Key issues with the peer-to-peer review process include **insurance companies providing insufficient transparency** on what it takes to secure an approval, **peer reviewers not having the authority to make decisions**, and **scheduling inflexibility** that adds to patient delays:



Survey Methodology

An online survey was sent to all 4,601 U.S. based radiation oncologists in ASTRO's member database, and 754 respondents completed more than half of the questions (16.4% response rate). Survey invitations were sent by email in September 2024, followed by multiple email reminders; the survey closed at the end of October 2024. Survey respondents are representative of the general ASTRO membership in terms of demographic and practice characteristics.

About ASTRO

The American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO) is the largest radiation oncology society in the world, with more than 10,000 members who are physicians, nurses, biologists, physicists, radiation therapists, dosimetrists and other health care professionals who specialize in treating patients with radiation therapies.

Radiation therapy contributes to 40% of global cancer cures, and more than a million Americans receive radiation treatments for cancer each year. For information on radiation therapy, visit [RTAnswers.org](https://www.rtan.org/), featuring our [Radiation Therapy in Focus](#) campaign. To learn more about ASTRO, visit our [website](#) and [media center](#) and follow us on [social media](#).

➔ Additional survey results are forthcoming. For more information, contact press@astro.org or healthpolicy1@astro.org.