

Issue At A Glance:

Rising Rates of Early Onset Cancer

Cancer diagnosis in young adults under 40 is on the rise, with nearly 80,000 young adults diagnosed with cancer each year. This brief provides an overview of the relationship between tobacco use and cancer, Every Woman Counts initiative, and the growing cancer rates in young adults.

Introduction

Approximately 2 million Americans were diagnosed with cancer (excluding non-melanoma skin cancer) during 2024, with over 600,000 deaths from the disease.¹ Research has shown that more than 40% of these diagnoses and nearly half the deaths are linked to preventable factors, such as smoking, lack of physical activity, obesity, and excessive sun exposure.^{1,2}

February is National Cancer Prevention Month, a time to raise awareness, share hope, celebrate advancements in medical science, and honor the strength of those battling cancer.³ Early onset cancer, which refers to cancers diagnosed in individuals aged 18-49, is on the rise.⁴ According to the American Cancer Society, early onset cancer is rising by nearly 2% annually.⁵ Furthermore, research published in *BMJ Oncology* predicts a 30% increase globally in early onset cancers between 2019-2030.^{5,6,7}

This brief provides an overview of the relationship between tobacco use and cancer, Every Woman Counts initiative, and the growing cancer rates in young adults.

Key Statistics

- 80,000** Young adults under 40 are diagnosed with cancer every year.⁸
- 9,000** Young adults under 40 die from cancer each year.⁸
- 12,000** Young adults under 40 are diagnosed with breast cancer each year.⁹
- 24,000** Young adults under 40 are diagnosed with testicular cancer each year.¹⁰
- 20,200** Young adults under 40 are diagnosed with colorectal cancer each year.¹¹

Bringing wholeness to individuals and communities, the Institute for Health Policy and Leadership (IHPL) strives to integrate health policy research and education with leadership development. Our goal is to improve the health of our communities by building on our strong heritage of health promotion and disease prevention.

To learn more, visit us at www.IHPL.llu.edu



LOMA LINDA
UNIVERSITY
HEALTH

Tobacco Use and Cancer

Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the United States, with nearly 90% of these deaths attributed to cigarette smoking and exposure to secondhand smoke. Individuals who smoke face 25 times the risk of developing lung cancer compared to those who do not smoke.¹² Furthermore, nearly 7,300 individuals who have never smoked die from lung cancer due to exposure to secondhand smoke.^{12,13}

Tobacco use represents a significant public health challenge and is the primary cause of preventable illness and death across the nation.¹⁴ Cigarette smoke contains over 7,000 chemicals, with at least 69 that are known to cause cancer, while other chemicals found in cigarettes interfere with the body's ability to fight the disease. Smoking weakens the immune system, impairing the body's effectiveness at destroying cancer cells, which can then grow and spread. It also damages or alters a cell's DNA, leading to uncontrolled cell growth and the formation of cancerous tumors.¹²

Therefore, on November 19, 2024, the U.S. Surgeon general at the time, Dr. Vivek Murthy, MD, issued a report, *Eliminating Tobacco-Related Disease and Death: Addressing Disparities – A Report of the Surgeon General*, highlighting health disparities in tobacco use.¹⁵ The report notes that while progress has been made in reducing cigarette smoking, disparities in tobacco use persist across various groups, including differences by races, ethnicity, income, education level, geographic location, and occupation.^{15,16} Additionally, it highlights tobacco prevention and control strategies that have the potential to reduce tobacco-related disparities, including reducing appeal, affordability, accessibility, and addictiveness of tobacco products through high-impact media campaigns.¹⁷

Every Woman Counts

Every Woman Counts (EWC) is an initiative offering free breast and cervical cancer screening services to women in California.

Administered by the California Department of Health Services, the program was established following the enactment of the Breast Cancer Act of 1993 and the Breast and Cervical Cancer Mortality Act of 1990.¹⁸ The mission of EWC is to reduce the medical and financial impacts of breast and cervical cancer while addressing health disparities among medically underserved, low-income populations.¹⁹ Furthermore, EWC helps eligible individuals enroll in the Breast and Cervical Cancer Treatment Program, which provides free treatment for those diagnosed with breast or cervical cancer.^{19,20}



Growing Cancer Rates in Young Adults

The rising rates of cancer in young adults is a concerning trend that has been observed in recent years.⁴ While cancer is traditionally more common in older adults, the incidence of certain types of cancer in young adults, particularly those under age 40, has been increasing.^{6,21}

Younger adults often do not visit their primary care provider regularly unless they have specific symptoms. When they do seek care, cancer is typically not the first concern for providers as it is less common in this age group.²¹ Additionally, cancers that occur in children and teens are much rarer, often different from those found in adults and typically caused by genetic changes that occur early in life. Unlike many adult cancers, childhood and young adult cancers are not strongly associated with lifestyle or environmental factors.²²

Key Trends and Statistics

Research has shown that the incidence of cancer in young adults has risen over the past few decades. According to the American Cancer Society, cancer is the fifth leading cause of death in young adults in the United States between the ages of 15 and 39.⁸

The types of cancer that are common or seeing increased rates in young adults include:

- **Breast cancer:** Rates of metastatic breast cancer in women under 40 have increased by 3.5% annually since 2004.²³
- **Thyroid cancer:** Thyroid cancer is one of the most common cancers in young adults under 40 and accounts for nearly 2.3% of all new cancer cases in the United States, with an estimated 44,000 new cases in 2024.^{24,25}
- **Colorectal cancer:** Colorectal cancer is the fourth leading cause of cancer deaths in adults under age 50, with number of new cases continuing to rise by 2% annually.^{26,27}
- **Melanoma:** Skin cancer, especially melanoma, has been increasing in young adults under 30, with new cases increasing by 3% among women, while decreasing by 1% among men annually.²⁸

Impact on Young Adults

A cancer diagnosis at any age can be life-changing, but it may have a more profound and lasting impact on mental health and lives of younger adults.²⁹ Studies show that young cancer patients have worse mental health compared to non-cancer patients, and poorer mental health is linked to an increase in healthcare utilization and decrease in quality of life.³⁰ Additionally, research has shown that survivors diagnosed between ages 15-39 experience higher levels of emotional distress compared to those diagnosed at age 40 or older.³¹

The high costs of cancer care, combined with the impact on employment and earnings due to cancer, its treatment, and its long-term effects, often lead to financial difficulties for young adults who have had little time to build savings.²⁹ A study found that nearly 23% of young adult cancer survivors struggled to afford basic necessities, while nearly half took on credit card debt and delayed major purchases.³²

Conclusion

The rising cancer rates among young adults are a public health concern. While some factors contributing to this rise are linked to environmental and lifestyles changes, others may involve genetic predispositions. Cancer survivors diagnosed as young adults may need additional emotional support to cope with mental and social challenges, along with tools to navigate healthcare costs, resources for financial independence, and solutions for affordable care.^{31,32} Increased awareness, early detection, and prevention strategies are essential to address this growing problem and improve outcomes for young adults facing life altering cancer diagnoses.

References

1. <https://www.aacr.org/patients-caregivers/awareness-months/national-cancer-prevention-month/>
2. <https://www.chcw.org/february-national-cancer-prevention-month/>
3. <https://www.redcross.org/local/texas/north-texas/about-us/news-and-events/news/celebrating-resilience--national-cancer-prevention-month.html>
4. <https://www.yalemedicine.org/news/early-onset-cancer-in-younger-people-on-the-rise>
5. <https://www.mskcc.org/news/why-is-cancer-rising-among-young-adults>
6. <https://www.uchicagomedicine.org/forefront/cancer-articles/why-are-more-young-people-getting-cancer>
7. <https://bmjoncology.bmj.com/content/2/1/e000049>
8. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/cancer-in-young-adults/key-statistics.html>
9. https://www.keep-a-breast.org/breast-cancer-101?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiApY-7BhBjEiwAOMrrEfkh0XPVPKRkLcuYZw5qGaBBgODwiC2dfna0c6lrlE3pGXE-NnvHchoCBn8QAvD_BwE
10. <https://www.cdc.gov/united-states-cancer-statistics/publications/testicular-cancer.html>
11. <https://www.cancer.org/content/dam/cancer-org/research/cancer-facts-and-statistics/annual-cancer-facts-and-figures/2024/sd1-cases-4-cancers-2024.pdf>
12. <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/about/cigarettes-and-cancer.html>
13. <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/campaign/tips/diseases/cancer.html>
14. <https://gis.cancer.gov/mapstory/tobacco/index.html>
15. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/2024-sgr-tobacco-related-health-disparities-full-report.pdf>
16. <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2024/11/19/eliminating-tobacco-related-disease-death-addressing-health-disparities.html>
17. <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/media/pdfs/2024/11/CDC-OSH-SGR-CDCgov-PPT-FINAL-508.pdf>
18. <https://healthequity.ucla.edu/partners/partnered-for-progress/>
19. <https://www.dhcs.ca.gov/services/cancer/EWC/Pages/default.aspx>
20. <https://a48.asmdc.org/resources/state-resources/are-you-or-someone-you-know-eligible-every-woman-counts-program-0>
21. <https://health.ucdavis.edu/blog/cultivating-health/cancer-is-on-the-rise-in-younger-adults-what-to-know-about-screening-and-your-risk/2024/04>
22. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/cancer-in-young-adults/cancers-in-young-adults.html>
23. <https://www.bcrf.org/blog/breast-cancer-young-women/>
24. <https://www.saintjohnscancer.org/blog/young-adult-thyroid-cancer/>
25. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/thyroid-cancer/about/key-statistics.html>
26. <https://acsjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.3322/caac.21820>
27. <https://colorectalancer.org/article/acs-releases-colorectal-cancer-estimates-2024>
28. <https://www.aad.org/media/stats-skin-cancer>
29. <https://www.apa.org/topics/behavioral-health/cancer-younger-adults>
30. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11010824/>
31. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1047279722000473>
32. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9734817/>
33. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/cancer-in-children/key-statistics.html>



Did you know?

Across the U.S., approximately 10,000 children under 15 are diagnosed with cancer each year.³³



LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY
HEALTH

Institute for Health Policy and Leadership

11209 Anderson Street
Loma Linda, CA 92354
Phone: 909-558-7022
Fax: 909-558-5638
www.IHPL.llu.edu

Questions?

Please contact Renée Chuang, MS,
Doctoral Graduate Assistant at the
Institute for Health Policy & Leadership
(RChuang@llu.edu).