



# Cancer in Young Adults

**Y**oung adults are individuals who are between 15 and 39 years of age. In 2011, around 70,000 young adults were diagnosed with cancer<sup>1</sup>. While this age group is more prone to death from accidents, suicide and homicide, cancer is actually the leading disease killer of young adults. Young adults are also six times more likely to be diagnosed with cancer than children (ages 0-14)<sup>2</sup>.

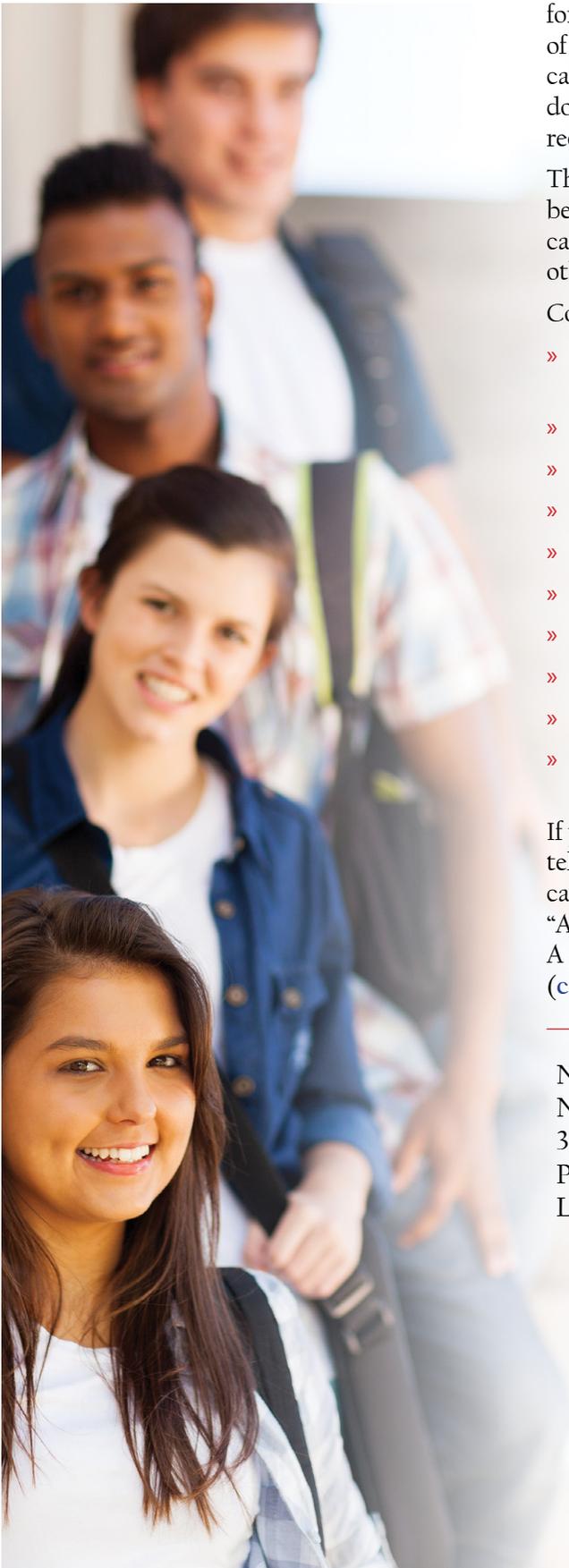
The most common types of young adult cancer vary by age sub-group. For young adults age 15 to 24 the most common diagnoses are leukemia and lymphoma, followed by central nervous system cancers, bone tumors, soft tissue and Kaposi sarcomas, germ cell, thyroid and melanoma. For the slightly older set, age 25 to 39, breast cancer diagnoses increase, as do thyroid cancers and melanoma<sup>3</sup>.

Young adult cancer incidence and survival rates vary among racial groups. African American young adults have average incidence rates, but the lowest 5-year survival rate of all groups. Asian/Pacific Islanders have the lowest incidence. White young adults have both the highest incidence rate and 5-year survival rate<sup>1</sup>.

There are some unique barriers to young adult cancer survivorship. Young adulthood is when most adults are the least likely to carry health insurance, especially if they are over age 26 and can no longer be included in their parents' plans. They also are more likely to need regular follow-up care if they do go into remission.

Young adults are also at a unique stage of their lives, which a cancer diagnosis can turn upside down. Some cancer treatments require a lot of time spent in the hospital, and a bank of sick time is not common among most young adults who are just beginning their careers or working to finish their higher education. They may have to delay certain milestones during treatment or while managing their cancer, which adds stress and feelings of isolation as young adults with cancer watch their peers graduate from college, dedicate themselves to careers, or start families.

Cancer among young adults presents another unique complication, which is that this age group is most likely to refrain from visiting a regular doctor – whether for aforementioned reasons of access, or simply because they don't suspect that their symptoms point to anything serious. When they do get to the doctor, their cancers are more likely to have developed to later stages. Physicians also might not suspect cancer when the patient presents symptoms, which further delays treatment. There are no regular screening tests *continued*



for the most common types of cancer among this age group – most of these begin at 40 or later. Physicians do not routinely order cancer screening for young adults, and insurance companies often do not cover these screening tests on patients who are outside the recommendation range.

The **American Cancer Society** recommends that young adults simply be aware of common signs and symptoms of cancer, and seek medical care if they are present. This is not a comprehensive list. If you have other symptoms, tell your healthcare provider.

Common symptoms include:

- » An unusual lump or swelling in the neck, breast, belly, testicle, or elsewhere
- » Unexplained tiredness and loss of energy
- » Easy bruising
- » Abnormal bleeding
- » Ongoing pain in one part of the body
- » Unexplained fever or illness that doesn't go away
- » Frequent headaches, often with vomiting
- » Sudden eye or vision changes
- » Loss of appetite or unplanned weight loss
- » A new mole or other spot on the skin, or one that changes in size, shape, or color

If you are a young adult and you have any family history of cancer, tell your healthcare provider. If you are a young adult who has a cancer diagnosis and is looking for more information, please see the “Additional Resources” section of the DHHS NE CCCP website. A good place to start is with the **American Cancer Society** ([cancer.org](http://cancer.org)) and **Stupid Cancer** ([stupidcancer.org](http://stupidcancer.org)).

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Nebraska Comprehensive Cancer Control Program  
Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services  
301 Centennial Mall South,  
PO Box 95026  
Lincoln, NE 68509

Contact: [jill.savage@nebraska.gov](mailto:jill.savage@nebraska.gov)

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#### Sources

1. An estimated projection calculated by the [Surveillance, Epidemiology and End Results \(SEER\) Program](#) SEER 18, 2007-2011
2. NIH National Cancer Institute “A Snapshot of Adolescent and Young Adult Cancers”
3. <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/aya/types>
4. <http://www.cancer.org/cancer/cancerinyoungadults/detailedguide/cancer-in-young-adults-finding-cancer-in-young-adults>