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Finding Cancer in Young Adults

Cancers in young adults are often found later than they are in other age groups. There are a number of reasons why the diagnosis of cancer might be delayed:

- Most young adults tend to be fairly healthy and might not go to the doctor unless they feel they really need to. This is especially true of young men.
- The young adult years are often a time of transition, when people begin living on their own and establish their own identity and lifestyle. Concerns other than health such as going to college, starting a career, spending time with friends, dating, or starting a family are often higher on the priority list at this time. Many young adults might not even have a regular doctor.
- Financial issues can affect whether or not a person goes to the doctor. For example, people in this age group are more likely to not have health insurance (or to have only very limited coverage). This can contribute to not wanting or being able to see a doctor right away.
- Even when a young person does go to the doctor with symptoms, cancer is not usually high on the list of probable causes because it's not common in this age group. Doctors might be more likely to think symptoms like pain or feeling tired are due to other, more common causes, which might delay a cancer diagnosis.

Still, some cancers in young adults can be found early, when treatment is more likely to be successful.

Screening for cancers in young adults

Screening is testing for a disease such as cancer in people who don't have any symptoms. Cancers are not common between ages 20 and 39, so there aren't many widely recommended screening tests to look for cancer in people in this age group who

are not at increased risk.

The risk of **cervical cancer** is very low in people under the age of 25. The risk rises with age. The American Cancer Society recommends that people with a cervix get screened for cervical cancer starting at age 25. (See [Can Cervical Cancer Be Found Early?](#)¹ for more details.)

Women should be aware of how their breasts normally look and feel, and should have any changes checked by a doctor. Most expert groups don't recommend that women have mammograms or other imaging tests to look for **breast cancer** until at least age 40. But screening might be recommended earlier for some women who are at high risk because of a strong family history or other factors. (See [American Cancer Society Recommendations for the Early Detection of Breast Cancer](#)² for more details.)

Some people have a higher risk of certain types of cancer because of a [strong family history](#)³ or because of specific [gene changes](#)⁴ they inherit from a parent. These might put a person at higher risk for cancers such as [melanoma skin cancer](#)⁵, or [breast](#)⁶, [colorectal](#)⁷, [thyroid](#)⁸, or other cancers. These people may need careful, regular exams or tests starting at an early age to look for signs of cancer. Talk to your doctor if you're not sure about your risk or what tests might be right for you.

Possible signs and symptoms of cancer in young adults

There are many reasons cancers in young adults might not be recognized right away. Sometimes the early symptoms of cancer can overlap with those from much more common illnesses or injuries. Young people might feel run down, get sick, or have bumps or bruises that could mask the early signs of cancer. But it's important to be aware of the common signs and symptoms of cancer. These can include:

- An unusual lump or swelling, especially in the neck, breast, belly, or testicle
- 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, sometimes along 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

More information on common symptoms for specific cancers can be found in [Types of Cancers That Develop in Young Adults](#)⁹. Other symptoms are also possible, depending on the type of cancer.

Many of these symptoms are much more likely to be caused by something other than cancer. Still, see a doctor if you have any of these symptoms – especially if they don't go away or they get worse.

Seeing a doctor

When you see the doctor, he or she will ask about your medical history and your symptoms and will examine you. Depending on your symptoms, different exams or tests might be needed. The doctor might order [blood tests](#)¹⁰, [imaging tests](#)¹¹ (like x-rays or CT scans), or other tests to help figure out the cause of your symptoms.

If your doctor thinks your symptoms might be caused by cancer, you will probably be referred to a specialist for more exams and tests. The type of doctor you see will depend on your age and what type of cancer is suspected.

In some cases, if an abnormal lump or tumor is found, the doctor might need to remove some or all of it so that it can be checked under a microscope for cancer cells. This is known as a [biopsy](#)¹². For most types of cancer, a biopsy is needed to confirm the diagnosis. Biopsies can be done in many ways, ranging from removing a small number of cells with a thin hollow needle, to more extensive surgery. The type of biopsy used will depend on where the lump or tumor is and other factors.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/cervical-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/detection.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/breast-cancer/screening-tests-and-early-detection/american-cancer-society-recommendations-for-the-early-detection-of-breast-cancer.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-causes/genetics/family-cancer-syndromes.html
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9. www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-in-young-adults/cancers-in-young-adults.html
10. www.cancer.org/treatment/understanding-your-diagnosis/tests/understanding-

[your-lab-test-results.html](#)

11. www.cancer.org/treatment/understanding-your-diagnosis/tests/imaging-radiology-tests-for-cancer.html
12. www.cancer.org/treatment/understanding-your-diagnosis/tests/testing-biopsy-and-cytology-specimens-for-cancer.html

References

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Fontham, ETH, Wolf, AMD, Church, TR, et al. Cervical Cancer Screening for Individuals at Average Risk: 2020 Guideline Update from the American Cancer Society. *CA Cancer J Clin.* 2020. <https://doi.org/10.3322/caac.21628>

National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN). Practice Guidelines in Oncology: Adolescent and Young Adult (AYA) Oncology. Version 1.2020. Accessed at: www.nccn.org/professionals/physician_gls/pdf/aya.pdf on October 2, 2019.

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