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Special Issues for Young Adults With Cancer

Young adults with cancer face many challenges, from the first onset of symptoms through treatment and beyond.

Delays in diagnosis

As mentioned in [Finding Cancer in Young Adults](#)¹, cancers are often found later in young adults than they are in other age groups. Sometimes this can complicate treatment if the cancer has grown large or has spread by the time it's found.

Treatment issues

As discussed in [How Are Cancers in Young Adults Treated?](#)², people in this age group are often caught between seeing doctors who specialize in treating children with cancer and doctors who mainly treat older adults. Not all doctors are familiar with treating cancers in this middle age group, which can often have unusual features. [Communication between patients and their doctors](#)³ can also be an issue, as many cancer doctors are more comfortable dealing with other age groups.

Regardless of where they are being treated, young adults with cancer can feel isolated and out of place. Most patients in doctor's offices or cancer centers are either older adults or younger children, so young adults aren't likely to see many people their own age who are dealing with the same issues they are. It's very important for people to be able to connect with others who understand what they're going through and can relate to them on their level. Many support groups – both in person and online – now exist for young adults with cancer who are looking to connect with others in similar situations.

Some young adults themselves can be challenging as patients. They might place a higher priority on other things going on in their lives rather than treating the cancer, resulting in missed appointments for tests or treatments. This might be out of a misunderstanding of the seriousness of the cancer, resentment over having to deal with the cancer, or even fear of the unknown.

Financial concerns

Young adults are more likely to be uninsured or to have very limited health insurance when compared to children or older adults. This might make them less likely to seek medical care in the first place or be unable to afford cancer treatment, which can cost a lot. What's more, people in this age group often aren't familiar with other types of financial resources that might be available to them.

Cancer and its treatment can also affect a person's ability to work. Doctor visits, appointments for exams and treatments, time needed to recover from treatment, and later follow-up visits can all make it hard to work at a time when many young people are just starting their careers. It's important for people to understand their rights as an employee when they are diagnosed with cancer, as well as how to work with their employer to best accommodate both parties. For more information, see [Working During Cancer Treatment](#)⁴ and [Returning to Work After Cancer Treatment](#)⁵.

Social and emotional issues

Some of the greatest challenges faced by young adults with cancer come from the fact that this tends to be a time of great change in a person's life, which comes with many of its own stresses. Young adults are often establishing their own identities at this time and developing their own social, emotional, and financial independence. Some might also be starting families of their own. A diagnosis of cancer can throw all of these things into disarray.

During treatment, patients and their families tend to focus on the daily aspects of getting through it and beating the cancer. But a number of emotional concerns can come up both during and after treatment. Some of these might last a long time. They can include things like:

- Dealing with physical changes (hair loss, weight gain, scars from surgery, etc.) that can result from the cancer and/or its treatment
- Worrying about the [cancer returning](#)⁶ or developing new health problems
- Resenting having cancer and having to go through treatment when others do not

- Having concerns about [what to tell others](#)⁷ or being treated differently or discriminated against (by friends, classmates, co-workers, employers, etc.)
- Having concerns about dating, marrying, and having and raising children

No one would choose to have cancer, but for many cancer survivors, the experience can be positive in the long term, allowing for clearer setting of priorities and helping to establish strong personal values. Still, some survivors may have a harder time recovering, adjusting to life after cancer, and moving on.

It's normal to have some anxiety or other emotional reactions after treatment, but feeling overly worried, depressed, or angry can affect many aspects of a young adult's growth. It can get in the way of relationships, school, work, and other parts of life. With support from family, friends, mental health professionals, and others, young adult cancer survivors can thrive in spite of the challenges they've had to face.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-in-young-adults/finding-cancer-in-young-adults.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-in-young-adults/treating-cancers-in-young-adults.html
3. www.cancer.org/treatment/finding-and-paying-for-treatment/choosing-your-treatment-team/the-doctor-patient-relationship.html
4. www.cancer.org/treatment/survivorship-during-and-after-treatment/staying-active/working-during-and-after-treatment/working-during-cancer-treatment.html
5. www.cancer.org/treatment/survivorship-during-and-after-treatment/staying-active/working-during-and-after-treatment/returning-to-work-after-cancer-treatment.html
6. www.cancer.org/treatment/survivorship-during-and-after-treatment/understanding-recurrence.html
7. www.cancer.org/treatment/understanding-your-diagnosis/telling-others-about-your-cancer.html

References

American Cancer Society. *Cancer Facts & Figures 2014*. Atlanta, Ga: American Cancer Society. 2014.

Bleyer A. Young adult oncology: The patients and their survival challenges. *CA Cancer J Clin.* 2007;57:242-255.

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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