history of the disease. It is now thought that many familial cancers arise from the interplay between common gene variations and similar exposures among family members to lifestyle/environmental risk factors. Only a small proportion of cancers are strongly hereditary, that is, caused by an inherited genetic alteration that confers a very high risk.

What Percentage of People Survive Cancer?

Over the past three decades, the 5-year relative survival rate for all cancers combined increased 20 percentage points among whites and 24 percentage points among blacks, yet it remains substantially lower for blacks (68% versus 61%, respectively). Improvements in survival (Table 7, page 18) reflect improvements in treatment, as well as earlier diagnosis for some cancers. Survival varies greatly by cancer type and stage at diagnosis (Table 8, page 21).

Relative survival is the percentage of people who are alive a designated time period (usually 5 years) after a cancer diagnosis divided by the percentage of people expected to be alive in the absence of cancer based on normal life expectancy. It does not distinguish between patients who have no evidence of cancer and those who have relapsed or are still in treatment, nor does it represent the proportion of people who are cured because cancer deaths also occur beyond 5 years after diagnosis. For information about how survival rates were calculated for this report, see “Sources of Statistics” on page 69.

Although relative survival rates provide some indication about the average experience of cancer patients in a given population, they should be interpreted with caution. First, 5-year survival rates do not reflect the most recent advances in detection and treatment because they are based on patients who were diagnosed several years in the past. Second, they do not account for many factors that affect individual survival, such as treatment, other illnesses, and biological or behavioral differences. Third,