

As a young adult (YA) with cancer, you are not alone. According to the National Cancer Institute, about 85,980 young people ages 15-39 will be diagnosed with cancer in the United States in 2023. As a YA cancer patient, you will likely face challenges specific to your age group. You may need to advocate for your care.

Below are issues you need to be aware of as a YA with cancer. For more information about each of these topics and helpful resources, visit www.LLS.org/YoungAdults.

Telling People about Your Diagnosis. Telling people about your diagnosis is a very personal decision. Some people with cancer choose to tell only close family members. Others find that it helps to let more people know about their diagnosis. By letting friends and family know about your diagnosis, you give them the chance to offer their support. Take some time to decide what information you want to share and with whom you want to share it.

If you decide to share your diagnosis, practice what you want to say. Anticipate questions and plan your answers. Be prepared for different reactions. Some people may not know what to say or do, but most will want to be supportive.

Social Media. Many people share their lives on social media. Before you share your cancer diagnosis on social media, take time to think it over. Would it upset you if a potential employer, a date, or a casual acquaintance learned about your diagnosis from a web search? If you do decide to share your diagnosis online, you may want to check your privacy settings first. Remember that anything shared online may be less private than you think. You may consider using group email or a private website to share updates with only a select number of people. If you decide not to share your diagnosis online, alert your friends and family members and ask them not to talk about your diagnosis in their social media posts.

Mental Health. Feelings of isolation, depression and anxiety are common among YA cancer patients. It is helpful to connect with others who know what you are going through. You can communicate with other YAs through support groups, peer-to-peer programs, online chats and retreats.

If your feelings of depression or anxiety interfere with your daily life, talk to your healthcare team. You may benefit from medication and/or talking to a mental health professional.

Dating. If you feel well enough during treatment, you never have to stop dating. But, you may not feel well enough for dating due to treatment side effects. Do not feel pressured to date if you are not interested or not feeling up to it. However, do not let cancer stop you from dating if you feel like you are ready.



Before a first date, take time to consider how much you would like to disclose about your diagnosis. Remember, every date you had before your diagnosis probably wasn't perfect. You may have bad dates after your diagnosis as well. You may also meet incredible new people.

If you are in an established relationship, your diagnosis may reveal positive and negative aspects of your relationship. Cancer can be difficult on everyone affected by the diagnosis. If you hit a rough patch, consider couples therapy. Ask your healthcare team for a recommendation.

Sexual Health and Intimacy. Cancer treatment may affect your sexual health and the way you feel about your body. Potential sexual side effects of cancer treatment include vaginal dryness, erectile dysfunction, and lack of desire. You may be self-conscious about physical changes to your body such as hair loss, weight changes, swelling, scars, or having a central line or port. Fatigue, nausea, pain, or other side effects may interfere with your desire for sex. Your doctor may even advise that you abstain from sex if your white blood cell or platelet counts are low.

Talk with your healthcare team about sexual changes. There are treatments available to help. You can also ask for a referral to a sex therapist.

Always use protection to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Pregnancy during cancer treatment can be dangerous for both the pregnant person and fetus.

Fertility. The YA age group covers many different stages of life. You may have children; you may know you want children in the future; you may not want children now, but may change your mind; or you may not have even thought about it. Cancer treatment can affect fertility in both women and men, making it difficult to conceive a child in the future. A cancer diagnosis may require you to think seriously about children.

Talk to your doctor about your fertility as soon as possible. There are ways to preserve fertility, but you may need to take action before you begin treatment. Options to preserve fertility may be expensive and may not be covered by health insurance.

Parenting. If you have children, telling them about your diagnosis is a big step. Even young children can often tell when something is wrong and will use their imagination to “fill in the gaps.” Make a plan to talk to them in a comfortable location. Prepare what you will say in advance and prepare for questions, silence or no questions at all. Explain to young children that they cannot “catch” cancer and no one did anything wrong to cause the cancer.

Work or School. Some people continue to go to work or school throughout cancer treatment, but others cannot. Talk to your healthcare team so you can make the decision that is best for you.

If you need to stop working, you may have the right to take medical leave under your employer’s policies, a state law, or federal law such as the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).

If you are a student, you may need to take a medical leave of absence. Learn your school’s policies, and talk to your school’s administration to discuss your options. If you have federal student loans, you can defer your student loan payments throughout treatment and then for six months after. Contact your loan servicer to learn more about deferment. You may also be eligible for scholarships for YAs with cancer.

When you return to work or school after cancer treatment, you may need to make changes so you can do your job or schoolwork to the best of your ability. Learn how to advocate for your rights in the workplace. An employer cannot treat you differently because of your cancer history. Some special accommodations may be protected by law.

Finances and Health Insurance. Under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), young adults can stay on their parents’ insurance until they turn 26. If you are on FMLA leave from your job, your employer must continue to provide health insurance while you are on FMLA. If you are uninsured, check to see if you qualify for your state’s Medicaid program which provides coverage for eligible, low-income individuals and families.

Even with health insurance, cancer treatment can put a strain on your finances. Besides paying for treatment, you still have to pay for all your basic needs such as food and rent. You may also have to take time away from work for treatment. It may be difficult to make ends meet. Create a detailed budget to get a better handle on your financial situation. Government and nonprofit organizations offer financial assistance programs. You may be eligible for assistance based on your diagnosis, income, employment status, or other factors.

Learn more about these topics and find YA resources at www.LLS.org/YoungAdults.

Questions For Members of Your Healthcare Team

- Where can I learn more about my diagnosis and treatment options?
- Will treatment affect my ability to have children? What can I do to preserve my fertility?
- How can I talk to other people my age with a cancer diagnosis?
- How will treatment affect my sex life? What can I do to manage sexual side effects?
- Will I be able to go to work or school during treatment?
- Who can I talk to about financial or practical concerns?

GET ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT

The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society’s **Information Specialists**, highly trained oncology social workers and nurses, can provide information and support and connect you to our **Clinical Trial Support Center** and **Registered Dietitians**.

- Call **800.955.4572** Mon.-Fri. 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. (ET)
- Visit **www.LLS.org/PatientSupport**

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