Article Series Treatments & Trials

Coping with the Unique Challenges of Cancer as a Young Adult

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Facing cancer as a young adult presents unique challenges that are different from when a cancer diagnosis is received later in life.

A cancer diagnosis is challenging at any age, but it can be especially disruptive during young adulthood. This is a time when you're just beginning to build your future — whether you're still in school, launching a career, enjoying a vibrant social life, or starting a family. Unlike older adults who may be more settled in their careers

or personal lives, young adults are often still figuring things out — and cancer can interrupt that momentum in profound ways.

About 80,000 people aged 20 to 39 are diagnosed with cancer each year in the US, making up about 4% of all cancer cases. Being a member of such a small population may sometimes make it feel like support resources are harder to find or less tailored to the needs of young adults.

Other factors that may take an emotional toll on young adults living with cancer include making medical decisions, dealing with the side effects of treatment, experiencing unforeseen costs and facing uncertainties about the future.

While you may feel reluctant to ask for help, you may discover that family, friends and medical caregivers are not only willing to help but they want you to give them the opportunity to support you. Having that support will go a long way toward easing your burden and increasing your sense of well-being.

Here are some of the unique issues young adults face when they are living with cancer

- **Career and education interruptions:** Treatment can delay school, internships, or early career steps — disrupting momentum and long-term plans.
- **Social isolation:** Friends may not know how to offer support, and young adults can feel difficulty relating with peers who aren’t going through the same health challenges.
- **Fertility concerns:** Some cancer treatments can impact fertility — that may often mean having to discuss fertility options before someone has had a chance to think about building a family.
- **Family pressure and role shifts:** People diagnosed in their 30s or 40s may be caregivers to young children and aging parents.
- **Body image, dating and relationships:** Changes in appearance, energy, or confidence can make dating or maintaining intimate relationships feel more complicated.
- **Loss of independence:** Needing help with finances, housing, or daily care can feel like a step backward during a life stage focused on self-sufficiency.

- **Financial strain and limited savings:** Young adults often face high medical costs without the safety net of stable income, savings, or comprehensive insurance — especially if they're early in their careers, gig workers, or still on their parents' health policy.

Below we've shared some **Microsteps** to help you address these unique challenges. As always, consult with your care team for personal health advice.

Do one small thing each week that helps you feel like you're still moving forward.
Even if you've had to pause school or work, you might listen to an audiobook related to your field, start journaling about your goals, or explore a short online class. These small actions can help you stay connected to your passions and feel a sense of progress.

Asking your care team for support groups or websites specifically for young adults.

These include peer groups – other young adults with cancer (known as AYAs, for Adolescents and Young Adults with Cancer) – where you can share your experiences and learn what others your age are going through. Many cancer treatment centers have groups for "AYAs" which stands for Adolescents and Young Adults with cancer. The StupidCancer.org website, for example, is aimed specifically at AYAs. Stupid Cancer is an organization that has resources with information about managing side effects, research, coping with insurance and finances, and ways to connect with other young people with cancer.

Writing down any fertility questions or concerns and bring them to your next medical appointment.
Even if you're not sure what to ask, having them written down can open the door to a conversation with your care team about your options and planning ahead. Download this helpful **downloadable resource** that has helpful information and questions to ask your doctor.

Scheduling 10 minutes of personal time each day that's just for you — no responsibilities, no caregiving.
Whether it's a short walk, music, or just quiet time, reclaiming even a small window

for yourself can help you maintain boundaries and emotional balance.

Asking your care team questions about your treatment and sharing your own goals and needs.
It may help to write down your questions, concerns and personal goals during cancer treatment. If issues like hair loss, skin health or sexual health are your priorities, let your care team know so they can address your concerns. Remember, young adults only make up a minority of cancer diagnoses each year, so it’s important to be vocal about your specific needs.

Making a list of specific tasks other people can help you with.

Being ready with a list of specific needs may make it easier to accept help. Think about asking for help getting to a chemo appointment or for someone to pick up groceries or your dry cleaning or take the pet to the groomer. Making a plan for help for some of the most mundane chores of daily living can be a great source of comfort when you’re coping with the challenges and fatigue of cancer treatment.

Asking a hospital social worker, financial navigator, or trusted adult about financial assistance or patient resources.
You don’t have to face the financial burden alone — support programs and experts exist to help, but they often require you to start the conversation.

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