Cancer Rates Are Increasing In People Under 50. Here's Why

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A new study finds cancer rates are rising for people under 50. Jose carlos Cerdeno/Getty Images

- Rates of gastrointestinal cancers are rising in people under age 50, according to a new study.
- While early-onset cancer is on the rise, cancer rates for people over age 50 are dropping.
- The researchers say the rising incidence in cancer among people under 50 could be attributed to various factors.

A new report has found that rates of gastrointestinal cancers in younger adults may be rising faster than any other type of cancer.

According to the study published in JAMA Network Open on August 16, gastrointestinal cancers are among the most common types of early-onset cancers occurring in people under 50. These types of cancer include:
- colon cancer
- rectal cancer
- stomach cancer
- pancreatic cancer

The findings add to growing evidence revealing that this type of cancer, which has historically been seen as a disease of older adults, is now being diagnosed more frequently in younger people.

Because young people aren’t routinely screened for many cancers until their mid-40s, many cases go undetected until they are diagnosed at a later, more aggressive stage.

“The results are quite alarming because not only is colorectal cancer increasing among young people — a fact that is now well known — it is increasing even more rapidly in some of the less common gastrointestinal malignancies such as bile duct cancer and pancreas cancer,” Dr. Anton Bilchik, PhD, surgical oncologist, chief of medicine, and director of the Gastrointestinal and Hepatobiliary Program at Saint John’s Cancer Institute at Providence Saint John’s Health Center in Santa Monica, CA, told Healthline.

Cancer rates are rising in young people

To measure the incidence rates of various types of cancer in people under 50, the researchers looked at the health data of 562,145 people with early-onset cancer between 2010 and 2019.

The team found that while cancer rates declined in people older than 50, cancers in people under 50 rose, particularly among those between the ages of 30 to 39.

Early-onset cancer grew by 0.74%, from 56,051 young people diagnosed with cancer in 2010 to 56,468 in 2019. The early onset cancer incidence per 100,000 individuals was 0.28%.

While breast cancer was the most common type of cancer diagnosed in 2019, gastrointestinal cancers — such as cancers of the stomach, colon, rectum, and pancreas — saw the fastest-growing rates that year.
“These cancers are very aggressive and have a worse outcome than colorectal cancer,” Bilchik said.

The researchers observed an 8% increase in early-onset breast cancer cases between 2010 and 2019.

Increases in the incidence of cancers of the urinary system and the female reproductive system were also recorded.

Gender and race played a role.

Early-onset cancer increased by 4.4% in females and decreased by 5% in males, which the researchers attribute to the rapid rise of breast and uterine cancers.

Cancer rates grew in American Indian or Alaska Native people, Asian or Pacific Islander people, and Hispanic people, while cancer incidence remained the same in White people and declined in Black people.

Why is cancer increasing in young adults?

The researchers say the rising incidence can be attributed to a mix of factors.

The differences observed across various ethnic groups, for example, is likely driven by genetic, socioeconomic, and environmental factors.

“Access to healthcare, exposure to risk factors, and differences in gut microbiome composition may all play a role,” Dr. Wael Harb, a hematologist and medical oncologist at MemorialCare Cancer Institute at Orange Coast Medical Center in Fountain Valley, CA, told Healthline.

Many studies argue that increasing obesity rates drive the spike in young people’s GI cancers.

“Obesity can drive malignancy through inflammation, hormonal changes and can itself be a trigger of colorectal cancer,” said Dr. Vikram Reddy, PhD, the chief of colon and rectal surgery at Yale School of Medicine and member of Yale Cancer Center.
A poor diet, rich in refined sugars, can cause chronic inflammation in the GI tract and an increased susceptibility to cancer, Reddy told Healthline.

Other factors that may increase cancer risk include:

- environmental exposures (i.e., smoke and gasoline)
- exposure to carcinogenic chemicals
- sleep patterns
- reduced physical activity

A study published in 2018 found that more sedentary time was linked to an increased risk of young-onset colorectal cancer.

Genetic predisposition may also lead to cancer.

For example, Reddy said a quarter of patients with early-onset colorectal cancer have a family history and should be screened at or before age 40.

“Surprisingly, a majority of these cancers occur sporadically, without a family history of cancer, making it even more challenging to pin down the exact causes,” Harb said.

How to combat rising rates of GI cancers

According to Reddy, younger patients aren’t screened via colonoscopy until they are 45.

And of those who have a family history, there’s low adherence to early screening recommendations.

“Due to the lack of screening, younger patients also present with more advanced diseases,” Reddy said.

The researchers say there’s a need for healthcare providers to be aware of the growing rates of cancer and consider cancer when diagnosing health issues in younger adults.

Awareness of the disparities is crucial, too, to help develop targeted interventions and tailored prevention strategies, Harb said.
“This new evidence adds to the existing body of research that highlights the need for more comprehensive investigations into the potential causes, as well as better strategies for early detection and prevention,” Harb said.

**Takeaway**

New research shows that rates of gastrointestinal cancers in younger adults are growing faster than any other type of cancer.

Cancers of the colon, rectum, stomach, and pancreas are the most common types of early-onset cancers. However, they may go undetected as most people aren’t screened for cancer until their mid-40s. The study findings highlight the need for early detection and prevention strategies.