

Script – Print – Age isn't just a number when it comes to cancer

Cancer can impact anyone, and the numbers show cases skewing younger.

A recent study suggests that certain cancers are being diagnosed more often in younger adults in the U.S., and the spike is due, in part, to adults and especially women in their 30s.

The study published in the journal *JAMA Network Open*, looked at 17 National Cancer Institute registries with more than 500,000 cases of early-onset cancer, or cancers diagnosed in patients under age 50, between 2010 and 2019. The study showed early-onset cancers increased during that time by an average of just over a quarter of a percent (.28).

In 2019, breast cancer had the highest number of incidences of early-onset cases. Gastrointestinal cancers and cancers of the urinary system and the female reproductive system are right up there as well.

Peggy Rogers is a nurse practitioner in genetics and medical oncology for OSF HealthCare. She sees similar trends among her patients.

"For women, they are the caregivers in the family, and they tend to worry about everyone else besides themselves, and maybe put off seeking care sooner," says Rogers. "But women also encourage their husbands to seek and visit with their provider. So that's a positive. But in general, I would say we have to keep talking."

Among gastrointestinal cancers, the most common early-onset cancers were found in the colon, rectum, stomach and pancreas. The fastest-growing incidence rates were found in the appendix, bile duct and pancreas.

"I think that the nuance that we found is it's more common to find gastric cancers, which I don't think people realize, and I don't think people are aware of, the signs for gastric cancer can be as simple as abdominal pain and nausea or feeling full quickly, and they may need medical attention sooner," says Rogers.

Some of the reasons for increased cancer rates in adults under age 50 include:

- Drinking alcohol in excess
- Smoking tobacco
- Eating a Western diet (prepackaged foods, fried foods, processed meats, high-sugar drinks)
- Being obese or overweight
- Being exposed to environmental toxins

"We are concerned that obesity is an epidemic, and it's not just overconsumption of food and inactivity," says Rogers. "It's the types of foods that people are eating, which is processed, it's quick, it's easy, but it's not the most beneficial."

To lower your overall cancer risk, Rogers recommends maintaining a healthy weight, increasing your exercise, trying to eat five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables each day, limiting processed foods, not smoking and drinking in moderation.

Rogers also recommends having conversations with your physician about your health. And for younger people who don't have a provider, it's important to find one.

"I think working towards having a visit at least once a year to establish with a provider – establish goals for their health care – is very important and sometimes family history is contributory and why people get cancers," she says. "So those are discussions that you can have with your primary care provider. Maybe they need a referral or their family member that's been affected with cancer should consider a genetic risk assessment to further look at what may be contributing to some of the cancers in the family, even at early onset."

For more information about cancer, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).