# Cancer cases in younger adults surge nearly 50% since 1973 driven by obesity and lifestyle factors



Cancer diagnoses among younger adults are rising alarmingly, signalling a shift in the landscape of the disease despite significant progress in treatment and survival rates over the past 50 years. A landmark study from Cancer Research UK reveals that while cancer death rates have decreased by over 22 per cent since the early 1970s, primarily due to advancements in detection and treatment, the instances of individuals developing the disease have soared, particularly among those aged 20 to 49.

Data indicates that diagnosed cases have increased nearly 50 per cent since 1973, jumping from 413 to 607 cancers per 100,000 people. This troubling trend underscores not only the effectiveness of improved medical interventions but also exacerbating lifestyle factors like obesity, sedentary behaviour, and poor dietary choices—elements that researchers argue could be contributing to higher rates of early-onset cancer.

Notably, at the recent American Society of Clinical Oncology conference in Chicago, Dr Jessica Paulus highlighted the rising incidence of colon cancer among younger adults, correlating it with escalating obesity rates; over one-third of young patients studied were classified as obese at diagnosis. She mentioned that these patients also reported higher levels of distress compared to their older counterparts, according to a distress thermometer tool used in clinical settings. This suggests a multifaceted issue where both physical health and mental well-being play crucial roles.

Professor Neil Iyengar from Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre echoed these concerns, amplifying the argument that obesity is a significant risk factor. He cautioned that excessive body fat—even in individuals with a normal body weight—can heighten cancer risk, emphasising the need for early adoption of healthier lifestyle habits. “We need to start thinking of some foods and high-sugar beverages in a similar way that we think about smoking: unnecessary, addictive, and harmful," he remarked.

Reinforcing these findings, a study published in March 2024 indicated that the increase in cancer diagnoses continues in both men and women, particularly for prostate and breast cancers. A significant push for initiatives around early diagnosis has been linked to improved survival rates, yet, trends show late-stage diagnoses remain prevalent, particularly as only 54 per cent of cancers in England are identified at the earliest, most treatable stages.

Conversely, experts like Professor Paul Pharoah from Cedars-Sinai noted that tobacco use does not seem to be a contributing factor to the rise in younger cancer cases, suggesting instead that improvements in cancer screening might emphasise the higher diagnoses in older demographics. Furthermore, although smoking is still the leading risk factor for cancer, the ongoing issues of delayed diagnosis and treatment disrupt the potential for timely intervention.

Against this backdrop, Cancer Research UK's Chief Executive Michelle Mitchell stressed the urgency for action in the upcoming National Cancer Plan for England. She pointed out the necessity for rapid access to diagnostic tests, better general practitioner referrals, and a national screening initiative for lung cancer to potentially save thousands of lives. Mitchell acknowledged that while strides have been made, the current situation—where more than 460 individuals die from cancer every day—demands a renewed commitment to combat the disease effectively.

As the understanding of cancer's trajectory continues to evolve, it is clear that addressing the factors contributing to this rising trend in diagnoses—particularly among younger populations—will require an integrated approach encompassing health education, lifestyle modifications, and public health policy reform. The call to action is not merely to reduce cancer mortality but to fundamentally alter the risk landscape for future generations.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-14772055/Experts-reveal-whats-driving-explosion-50s-cancer-cases-landmark-study-shows-23-cent-surge-90s.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[6]](https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-us/cancer-statistics)
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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-14772055/Experts-reveal-whats-driving-explosion-50s-cancer-cases-landmark-study-shows-23-cent-surge-90s.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/mar/13/uk-cancer-study-big-fall-in-death-rates-middle-age> - A UK cancer study published in March 2024 reveals a significant decline in cancer death rates among middle-aged adults since the early 1990s. The research highlights a 53.2% decrease in lung cancer mortality for men and a 20.7% reduction for women, attributed to reduced smoking rates. Additionally, improvements in early detection and treatment have led to decreased death rates for breast and bowel cancers. However, the study also notes a 57% increase in cancer diagnoses among men and a 48% rise among women, primarily due to prostate and breast cancers. The authors attribute this rise to an aging population and lifestyle factors such as obesity, alcohol consumption, and sun exposure. Michelle Mitchell, CEO of Cancer Research UK, emphasized the need for continued efforts in cancer prevention and early detection to sustain these positive trends.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/feb/02/progress-on-cancer-survival-in-uk-at-slowest-in-50-years-study-finds> - A study published in February 2024 indicates that progress in improving cancer survival rates in the UK has slowed to its lowest point in 50 years. Between 2011 and 2018, the average annual increase in 10-year survival rates was just 0.6%, a significant decline from previous decades. The study attributes this stagnation to factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disrupted cancer care, and systemic issues within the National Health Service (NHS). Experts call for a renewed focus on cancer prevention, early detection, and treatment to reverse this trend and improve survival outcomes.
4. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2025/01/early-cancer-diagnosis-in-england-reaches-highest-ever-level/> - In January 2025, NHS England announced that the proportion of patients diagnosed with cancer at an early stage has reached its highest level ever. Data from September 2023 to August 2024 shows that nearly 59% of patients were diagnosed at stages one or two, when treatment is more effective. This improvement follows a major drive by the NHS to encourage individuals, especially those at higher risk due to hereditary or lifestyle factors, to come forward for life-saving checks. Initiatives like the NHS Lung Health Check and Liver Health Programmes have been instrumental in this progress.
5. <https://www.macmillan.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/research/cancer-statistics-fact-sheet> - Macmillan Cancer Support's fact sheet provides comprehensive statistics on cancer in the UK. It estimates that nearly 3.5 million people are living with cancer, an increase from around 3 million in 2020. The data also reveals that more than 400,000 people are diagnosed with cancer each year in the UK, equating to an average of one diagnosis every 90 seconds. The fact sheet highlights the growing prevalence of cancer and underscores the importance of continued research and support for those affected.
6. <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-us/cancer-statistics> - Cancer Research UK's statistics page offers detailed information on cancer incidence, survival, and mortality rates in the UK. It highlights that cancer is the leading cause of death in the UK, with over 450 people dying from the disease every day. The page also discusses trends in cancer survival, noting that survival rates have improved over the past few decades, but challenges remain, particularly in early diagnosis and treatment. The statistics underscore the need for ongoing research and public health initiatives to combat cancer.
7. <https://www.cancer.org/latest-news/study-millennials-increased-risk-for-some-obesity-linked-cancers.html> - A study highlighted by the American Cancer Society indicates that millennials are at an increased risk for certain obesity-linked cancers. The research found that individuals born around 1985 have a significantly higher risk of developing cancers such as kidney, gallbladder, pancreatic, endometrial, colorectal, and multiple myeloma compared to those born around 1950. The study emphasizes the impact of the obesity epidemic on the rising incidence of these cancers among younger adults and calls for public health interventions to address this growing concern.