Only One in Five U.S. Young Adults With Advanced Cancer Receive Palliative Care as Part of Treatment, Study Shows

American Cancer Society researchers suggest integrating palliative care earlier and more consistently into routine oncology care is needed

ATLANTA, July 23, 2026 — Young adults with advanced cancer face unique challenges that make palliative care especially important. This population often experiences physical, emotional, and social needs while undergoing treatment, related to their developmental and life-stage transitions. However, a new study by researchers at the American Cancer Society (ACS) reveals that despite a small increase in use over time, only 18.3% of young adults in the United States with advanced cancer received palliative care as part of treatment in 2023. The study is published today in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) Network Open.*

"Palliative care can help address symptoms, support decision-making, and improve quality of life during treatment, yet many young adults are still not receiving these services," said Kewei Sylvia Shi, MPH, associate scientist, health services research at the American Cancer Society, and lead author of the study. “We need to get this population the care they need, especially as rates of early-onset cancers continue to increase.”

Palliative care is specialized medical treatment for anyone living with a serious illness, focused on providing relief from symptoms and stress. Its primary goal is to improve the quality of life for both the patient and their family.

For the study, researchers analyzed data from the National Cancer Database of 67,706 young adults 18 to 39 years of age diagnosed with stage IV solid tumors or poor-prognosis high-grade brain tumors between 2010 and 2023.

The results show that the use of palliative care alongside cancer treatment increased from 9.3% in 2010 to 18.3% in 2023. However, utilization remained low. Between 2021 and 2023, only 17.1% of young adults received palliative care while undergoing treatment for their cancer — that’s about 1 in 5 people. Researchers also found palliative care use varied by cancer type, with the highest rates among young adults with lung, stomach, kidney, breast, and pancreatic cancers.

“Cancer profoundly disrupts the lives of young adults. Beyond its physical effects, it can impact relationships, education, and plans for the future. As palliative care clinicians, it’s our role to walk alongside patients and families and understand their values and goals so we can ease the physical and emotional burdens of cancer,” said Dr. Arif Kamal, chief patient officer at the American Cancer Society and a palliative medicine specialist. “Palliative care should be integrated into oncology care for all people with cancer, no matter their age. And research has consistently shown that when palliative care and oncology teams work together, we can provide the best possible treatment while making sure it reflects what matters most to each patient. This is what compassionate cancer care is about: seeing the person beyond the diagnosis and making sure no one has to face the hardest parts of cancer alone.”

“This research highlights the pressing need for policies that will improve access to palliative care services for patients with cancer, especially for young adults, who often face unique challenges over the course of their cancer journey,” said Lisa Lacasse, president of the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network. “We are urging Congress to pass the Palliative Care and Hospice Education and Training Act, which would improve patients’ access to quality palliative care services while expanding palliative care research funding and training tomorrow’s workforce to provide comprehensive care that treats the whole person.”

Other ACS researchers contributing to this study include Dr. Robin Yabroff and senior author Dr. Xuesong Han.

Additional ACS Resources:

- ACS Study Finds Early Palliative Care Remains Underused Among Patients With Advanced Cancer
- Palliative Care | American Cancer Society
- Types of Cancers That Develop in Young Adults | American Cancer Society

- Treating Cancers in Young Adults | American Cancer Society

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The American Cancer Society is a leading cancer-fighting organization with a vision to end cancer as we know it, for everyone. For more than 110 years, we have been improving the lives of people with cancer and their families as the only organization combating cancer through advocacy, research, and patient support. We are committed to ensuring everyone has an opportunity to prevent, detect, treat, and survive cancer. To learn more, visit cancer.org or call our 24/7 helpline at 1-800-227-2345. Connect with us on Facebook, X, and Instagram.

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