

FACT SHEET



Cancer in adolescents and young adults

Cancer is generally more common in older people – around 85% of Australian cases are diagnosed in people aged 50 and over. The average age of a cancer diagnosis for the overall population is 65 years.¹

Only around 2% of new cancer cases are diagnosed in people aged 15-29 years, and less than 4% in people aged 30-39 years. However, this 6% still equates to more than 5,000 Australian adolescents and young adults being diagnosed with cancer each year¹ – four times the rate of cancer in children less than 15 years of age.

The types of cancers diagnosed in adolescents and young adults are often different from those commonly diagnosed in younger and older people, however they can also get cancer in the same parts of the body as older adults. A different treatment approach may be required for the adolescent and young adult age group, even if the cancer appears to be the same.

Incidence^{1,2}

- a total of 1,751 **Australians** aged 15-29 were diagnosed with cancer in 2001, the latest year for which national statistics are available (909 males and 842 females)
- a total of 36 **Tasmanians** aged 15-29 were diagnosed with cancer in 2001 (19 males and 17 females)
- a total of 3,384 **Australians** aged 30-39 were diagnosed with cancer in 2001 (1,352 males and 2,032 females)
- a total of 82 **Tasmanians** aged 30-39 were diagnosed with cancer in 2001 (38 males and 44 females)
- the number of new cases increased with age – 318 a year among **Australians** aged 15-19; 533 among 20-24 year olds, 900 among 25-29 years olds, 1,310 among 30-34 year olds, and 2,074 among 35-39 year olds

Mortality^{1,3}

- in 2001, cancer was the second most common cause of death among Australians aged between 12-24 years, after injury and poisoning
- a total of 207 **Australians** aged 15-29 died from cancer in 2001 (121 males and 86 females)
- a total of 2 **Tasmanians** aged 15-29 died from cancer in 2001 (1 male and 1 female)
- a total of 540 **Australians** aged 30-39 died from cancer in 2001 (242 males and 298 females)
- a total of 4 **Tasmanians** aged 30-39 died from cancer in 2001 (1 male and 3 females)

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Australasian Association of Cancer Registries, *Cancer in Australia 2001*, published 2004. www.aihw.gov.au

² Tasmanian Cancer Registry, *Cancer in Tasmania 2001*, published 2004. www.menzies.utas.edu.au/cancer/cancer.htm

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Australia's young people: their health and wellbeing 2003*, published 2003. www.aihw.gov.au

Survival⁴

- cancer survival rates are improving for most cancers across all age groups in Australia, thanks largely to earlier detection and better treatment
- unfortunately, the rate of progress in improving survival from cancer in adolescents and young adults has lagged behind the rate in children and older adults
- Australia has done well in improving the survival in 50-80 year-olds, less well in children, and less well in 20-40 year-olds. The worst improvement has been in 25-30 year-olds
- the five year relative survival rate⁵ for **Australian males** aged 15-39 with cancer improved from 74% in 1982-86 to 77% in 1987-1991 and 79% in 1992-97
- the five year relative survival rate for **Australian females** aged 15-39 with cancer improved from 79% in 1982-86 to 81% in 1987-1991 and 84% in 1992-97
- the five year relative survival rate for **Australians** (males + females) aged 15-39 with cancer improved from 77% in 1982-86 to 79% in 1987-1991 and 82% in 1992-97

Most common cancers in Australians (males + females) aged 15-39 years⁶

1. Melanoma (1,361 cases; 27% of all cancers in this age group)
2. Breast cancer (676 cases; 13%)
3. Testicular cancer (406 cases; 8%)
4. Thyroid gland cancer (381 cases; 7%)
5. Bowel cancer (243 cases; 5%) and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (242 cases; 5%)

Most common cancers in Australian males aged 15-39 years⁶

1. Melanoma (609 cases; 27% of all cancers in this age group)
2. Testicular cancer (406 cases; 18%)
3. Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (158 cases; 7%)
4. Bowel cancer (123 cases, 5.5%) and leukaemia (120 cases; 5.5%)
5. Brain cancer (116 cases; 5%) and lip cancer (115 cases; 5%)

Most common cancers in Australian females aged 15-39 years⁶

1. Melanoma (752 cases; 26% of all cancers in this age group)
2. Breast cancer (674 cases; 23%)
3. Thyroid gland cancer (295 cases; 10%)
4. Cervical cancer (197 cases; 7%)
5. Bowel cancer (120 cases; 4%) and ovarian cancer (118 cases; 4%)

About Professor Archie Bleyer

Professor Bleyer is Medical Advisor at the St Charles Medical Center's Cancer Treatment Center in Oregon, in the United States.

In the 1990s, Professor Bleyer was Chair of the world's largest paediatric cancer research organisation, the Children's Cancer Group, which included members in Perth, Sydney, Melbourne and New Zealand. In 2000, the group merged with other national paediatric groups to form the Children's Oncology Group. He now heads up adolescent and young adult research projects within the Children's Oncology Group. Professor Bleyer has undertaken extensive research into cancer in children, adolescents and young adults, and is widely published.

⁴ Statistics collated for The Cancer Council Tasmania by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

⁵ Five year relative survival rates describe the proportion of cancer patients expected to be alive five years after diagnosis, relative to similar people (same age and gender) who do not have cancer – thus allowing for other possible causes of death (eg. from accidents and other diseases). Five year rates are often used because many cancers are considered cured after this time, though this is not always reliable.

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's age-specific interactive cancer data cube at <http://www.aihw.gov.au/cancer/datacubes/index.cfm>