

## Patient Advocate Corner

### Planet Cancer: A Community of Young Adults With Cancer



Heidi Adams

By Heidi Adams

There are more of us young adults with cancer than you think. We are the statistical outliers, unexpectedly diagnosed with cancer between the age of 15 and 39, who come into your office, week after week, and scan the room—consciously or unconsciously—for people our own age. More likely than not, we won't see anyone else.

We'll toss the brochure about support groups because it's written for our 70-year-old grandmas. We'll wonder why you don't have Internet access in your waiting room. We'll ask if we can delay chemo to attend a bachelor party in Vegas. And, after months of never encountering another young adult with cancer, many of us will come to the same conclusion: "I must be the only one."

In fact, young adult cancer patients aren't as rare as you might think: Nearly 70,000 young adults between the ages of 15 and 39 in the U.S. are diagnosed annually with cancer—nearly 7% of all cancer diagnoses. Cancer is the leading disease killer of young adults, and young adults are the most likely group to experience a delayed diagnosis. And—perhaps most startling—survival rates for young adults between 25 and 35 have remained flat since the 1970s.

When you find young adults in your waiting room, send them to Planet Cancer ([www.planetcancer.org](http://www.planetcancer.org)), a vibrant, one-of-a-kind community of support and advocacy for young adults with cancer. Planet Cancer is the place where young adults will find someone else who understands what it's like to move back home with your parents, to quit school or a newly launched career, to lose your fertility or face your own mortality for the first time.

**At Planet Cancer, we work in three program areas to fulfill our mission:**

**Online support.** The Planet Cancer Web site ([www.planetcancer.org](http://www.planetcancer.org)) is a thriving online resource at the heart of

which is the newly launched My Planet social network. Affectionately referred to as "MySpace on prednisone," the My Planet community is where hundreds of registered users share experiences, stories, photos, music, blogs and more, topped off with young adult cancer news, information, "cancertainment" and resources. The Planet Cancer Web site also serves as a clearinghouse of other young adult programs, groups, and activities around the country.

**Face-to-face support.** Our free weekend retreat programs bring together young adults for networking, recreation, relaxation, and personal exploration. We are proud to have developed the first programs in the country for 25 to 40-year-olds and young couples facing cancer; programs that we now offer in addition to our original weekend programs for 18 to 25-year-olds.

**Advocacy and awareness.** We think that spreading the word on behalf of young adults is our greatest responsibility, and we enlist young adults to take an active role in reaching out to each other and the healthcare community. Planet Cancer is also a founding member of the LiveSTRONG Young Adult Alliance (a strategic initiative of the Lance Armstrong Foundation), a national coalition of organizations working to improve survival rates and quality of life for young adults with cancer. We work hard to raise awareness about the unique needs and issues of this underserved population, and advocate in the medical community with the goal of improving young adults' survival rates and quality of life.

So the next time you see a young adult patient in your office, remember that they have unique needs and issues and deserve peer support. The bachelor party in Vegas? That's your call.

Visit [www.planetcancer.org](http://www.planetcancer.org) e-mail: [contactus@planetcancer.org](mailto:contactus@planetcancer.org) or call 512-452-9010 for more information.

*Heidi Adams founded Planet Cancer in 2000 based on her own experience as a young adult diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma at age 26. She is the Executive Director of Planet Cancer and the advocacy cochair of the LiveSTRONG Young Adult Alliance.*

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