

# A BRIEF UPDATE

From the Long-Term Follow-Up Study

July 2015

<http://ltfu.stjude.org>

## Topic: HEALTH CHANGES AND AGING

### Why did we study this topic?

Aging is a natural process for everyone. It leads to a decline in function of the body's organs, which commonly results in conditions like hearing loss, memory problems, or heart disease. The rate at which a person ages depends on many factors, including genes, health habits, exposures to harmful toxins, and access to healthcare.

Treatments for childhood cancer may affect the health of organs and influence the timing of the aging process. We wanted to learn more about the factors that influence survivors' overall **health status**, in order to inform survivors and their healthcare providers about ways to help survivors maintain or improve their health.

**Health status** is a comprehensive way of thinking about health. It takes into account people's feelings about their own health as well as the chronic physical and emotional conditions that affect their ability to function in daily life.

### Who and What did we study?

We compared responses of survivors and siblings to LTFU Study health surveys between 1995 and 2007. The surveys included questions about both aspects of a person's health status: chronic health conditions and personal perceptions of health.

We looked at six specific areas that make up overall health status, including people's feelings about:

1. Their general physical health
2. Their general emotional health
3. How health problems limited their ability to do things like climbing a few flights of stairs, carrying groceries, or walking a short distance
4. How health problems affected daily function (ability to hold a job, need for help with personal care or routine needs)
5. Pain related to cancer/treatment

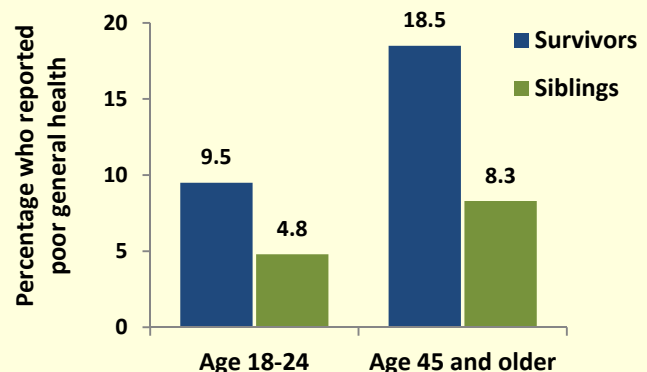
6. Fear/anxiety related to cancer/treatment

We only looked at sibling responses for the first four categories.

### What we found:

- Both survivors and siblings reported declining general health as they aged.
- Survivors were more likely than siblings to have poor overall health status.
- Survivors who were obese, who smoked, or who were physically inactive reported poorer health in nearly all of the six areas we studied.
- Certain groups, like females, had a faster decline in health status that was linked to having more chronic health conditions. This finding underlines the importance of regular check-ups to stay on top of health issues.

### Survivors were more likely than siblings to report poor general health, especially as they got older



### Recommendations:

- ✓ Survivors should review their current health concerns and health habits with their providers, and discuss things they can do to maintain or improve their health.
- ✓ Achieving a healthy weight, not smoking, and becoming more active can make a big difference in all aspects of a person's health.

**Reference:** Age-dependent changes in health status in the Childhood Cancer Survivor cohort. Hudson MM, Oeffinger KC, Jones K, Brinkman TM, Krull KR, Mulrooney DA, Mertens A, Castellino SM, Casillas J, Gurney JG, Nathan PC, Leisenring W, Robison LL, Ness KK. J Clin Oncol. 2015 Feb 10;33(5):479-91.

# Take Action to Maintain Your Health

This study looked at adult survivors' health as they aged over several years. Like everyone, survivors experienced a decline in health and function with age. But the study results emphasize that survivors need to be more proactive than people who did not have cancer in taking care of their health and managing chronic medical conditions. Additionally, access to rehabilitation services (physical therapy, occupational therapy, etc.) is important for many survivors to maintain health status. The passage of the US Affordable Care Act (see box below) may make it easier for survivors to get the health services they need.

## What can you do to maintain your health?



**Share your treatment history with your doctor and stay up-to-date with health screenings.** Dr. Melissa Hudson led the research team for this study. She says, "Survivors must receive follow-up care throughout their lives. For some, healthcare needs will be complex. To help assure their specific needs are addressed, survivors should know about the health risks that are linked to their cancer treatment." Dr. Hudson also notes that many survivors need rehabilitation services to help them stay active and be able to care for themselves. Understanding how the new health care law can help survivors gain access to these services is important, especially for those who have limited or no insurance coverage.

**Practice healthy behaviors—above all, *get active!*** Tobacco use, poor food choices, and physical inactivity add to the effects of treatment and can increase survivors' risk of developing poor health and becoming disabled. It's important for survivors who smoke to **quit smoking**. And all survivors should try to **eat a healthy diet, maintain a healthy weight, and be as physically active as their health allows**.

**Most people, even those who already have activity limitations, can do some type of physical exercise.** "Unfortunately," says Dr. Hudson, "less than one in three survivors in the LTFU Study follow the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines for physical activity." The CDC guidelines call for just 30 minutes of moderate exercise—like brisk walking—on five or more days per week. Please do yourself a favor and ask your doctor for **an exercise plan that's safe for you**.

See the April 2015 LTFU Brief Update for tips on how to become more active. (Find it at: <https://lftu.stjude.org/newsletters.html>)

## US Affordable Care Act may help survivors access needed services

**The Affordable Care Act (ACA) requires that all Americans be covered by health insurance**, whether or not they have a job. The ACA requires insurance companies to provide coverage for many services that are essential for survivors, including emotional and behavioral health treatment and rehabilitation services. The act also requires penalty-free coverage for existing conditions. And it provides for subsidies for people with moderate and low incomes to reduce the cost of premiums, deductibles, and co-pays.



**Unfortunately, a new LTFU study shows that only a quarter of survivors were familiar with the ACA.** Just one in five felt they could benefit from the act's protections. This lack of familiarity with the ACA may prevent some survivors from gaining access to quality healthcare. Dr. Elyse Park, who led the study, has called for "survivor navigators," trained individuals who can help survivors overcome barriers to quality medical care and improve access to survivorship care and services through the ACA. Many hospitals and survivorship clinics are beginning to offer survivors this type of help.

**If your health insurance policy doesn't cover the services you need or if you need help paying for insurance, please ask your healthcare provider for more information about the ACA.**

### References:

Childhood Cancer Survivor Study participants' perceptions and understanding of the affordable care act. Park ER, Kirchoff AC, Perez GK, Leisenring W, Weissman JS, Donelan K, Mertens AC, Reschovsky JD, Armstrong GT, Robison LL, Franklin M, Hyland KA, Diller LR, Recklitis CJ, Kuhlthau KA. *J Clin Oncol*. 2015 33(7):764-72.

What the Affordable Care Act means for survivors of pediatric cancer. Mueller EL, Park ER, Davis MM. *J Clin Oncol* 2014 32:615-617.

### Online Resources: Health Insurance

<https://www.healthcare.gov/coverage/what-marketplace-plans-cover/>  
<http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/financial-considerations/health-insurance>

### Online Resources: Healthy Habits

<http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyLiving/>