

New Data Reveal Widening Cancer Prevention Gaps in Rural America

People in rural communities face steeper obstacles to cancer prevention and early detection, notes the Prevent Cancer Foundation.

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Alexandria, Va. – New findings from the Prevent Cancer Foundation show a concerning gap in how people in rural communities face steeper obstacles to cancer prevention and early detection, reinforcing the urgent need for better access, clearer information and more equitable care.

According to the Foundation's 2026 Early Detection Survey, people living in rural areas are more likely to see cancer as a death sentence compared to those living in urban or suburban communities (43% compared to 35%). But many cancers can be successfully treated, especially when found early, when there are more treatment options and increased chances for better outcomes. Unfortunately, this is not the reality for many people living in rural areas.

Screening rates are lagging. Less than half (48%) of rural Americans say they have had a routine medical appointment or routine cancer screening in the last year, compared to more than half of urban and suburban Americans (56%). For many, regardless of where they live, [this is driven by a common barrier to screening](#): cost. Thirty-nine percent of rural respondents said they are behind on getting screened because they can't afford it.

People in rural communities are skeptical of the health care system.

Skepticism of the health care system is not unique to rural residents; however, more than half (55%) of rural respondents' skepticism stems from the belief that the health care system prioritizes profit over patient care.

Rural adults differ from others when it comes to attitudes and feelings toward their own health care providers. The survey revealed that despite not trusting the system, most urban or suburban respondents trusted their own health care providers. But a quarter of rural respondents (25%) said they have felt dismissed or not listened to by a health care provider, compared to 20% of urban and suburban respondents. This could be another reason for skipping out on doctors' visits and routine cancer screenings.

Although there are lifestyle changes that can reduce your cancer risk, rural respondents are less likely to believe they work.

Compared to their urban and suburban counterparts (71%), rural respondents are less likely to believe you can prevent cancer or reduce your risk (64%). Across all categories (e.g., getting routine cancer screenings, eating a healthy diet, avoiding tobacco products), people living in rural communities were less likely to indicate there were lifestyle factors that could reduce one's cancer risk.

Despite these challenges, the data point to a few key opportunities to close the gap.

Nearly half (48%) of people living in rural communities say that clear, consistent and transparent communication from providers would increase their trust in the health care system when it comes to cancer screening.

Many rural respondents expressed interest in more accessible and less invasive screening options:

- Nearly half (48%) said they would be more likely to complete cervical cancer screening if they could self-administer the test in a clinical setting.
- Like urban and suburban adults, rural adults (33%) say that they're more likely to prioritize colorectal cancer screenings if there was a different, less-invasive test or screening. Thirty-two percent (32%) of rural adults cited at-home tests and another 30% of rural adults cited blood tests as options that would make them more likely to prioritize their routine colorectal cancer screening.

Expanding options like at-home and self-administered tests can reduce barriers like distance, lack of time and discomfort, while mobile screening units and community-based care can bring services closer to where people live. Strengthening patient navigation programs can also help people better understand their options, manage costs and connect with available resources, including insurance coverage or financial assistance.

Vaccination remains another critical awareness and education area across all communities, but especially so among people living in rural areas.

- Rural respondents (42%) are less likely to vaccinate their children against [human papillomavirus \(HPV\)](#), which can cause at least six types of cancer, compared to urban and suburban respondents (49%).

Increasing awareness and access to the HPV vaccine and routine screenings is another critical step in stopping cancer before it starts or detecting it early. Clear, consistent communication from

providers and focusing on patient-centered care can help people feel seen and supported, as well as build trust between patients and their health care providers.

“It’s clear from the data that barriers in rural communities go beyond access—they show a need to improve trust, information sharing and the patient experience,” said Jody Hoyos, CEO of the Prevent Cancer Foundation. “When people feel heard, receive clear information and can access routine screenings in ways that work for their lives, they are more likely to take action. That’s where we have an opportunity to make meaningful, lasting change.”

To further help combat these barriers, the Prevent Cancer Foundation is focusing a portion of its [2027 Impact Grants](#) cycle on supporting rural organizations doing critical work in their communities, with the aim of better health outcomes for all. Through these grants, the Foundation invests in community-based solutions that expand access to cancer prevention and early detection services.

You can find information and resources on all cancer types studied in the 2026 Early Detection Survey, including information on relevant screenings, at preventcancer.org/betteroutcomes.

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