Happy holidays to all our CORE Studies participants! It’s the perfect time of year to update you with the latest edition of CORE News. This year brings fascinating stories about longevity: studies about surviving and thriving after a cancer diagnosis, as well as a personal story from a (very) long life.

In going back through our records, we found an active participant who’s more than a hundred years old! Meet Gwendellyn Roberts, who’s been contributing information to the CORE Studies for nearly two decades.

We also bring you summaries about two recent studies based on information you’ve shared over the years. Wine lovers might be cheered by learning about our research on the links between wine consumption and long-term colorectal cancer survival. And CORE Studies researchers have made an unexpected discovery about how body weight affects long-term survival. (Here’s a hint: it’s NOT a “lose-weight-now” finding.) You’ll also get an update about returning genetic results generated in the research context.

We just can’t say it enough: your continued, personal contributions to colorectal cancer research are priceless. It’s quite rare for a study project to last more than two to five years. Thanks to you and your fellow participants, we’ve been going strong for more than twenty years. We recently submitted an application to get another 5 years of funding and are hopeful that this will not be the last time you hear from us. Again, we offer our deepest gratitude for your ongoing generosity, and wish you the best for the coming year!

Sincerely,

Polly A. Newcomb, PhD, MPH
Principal Investigator

Participant name
Participant address
City, State ZIP
Last summer, CORE Studies participant Gwendellyn (Gwen) Roberts celebrated her second birthday — of her second century of life, that is. Today, she’s 102 years old, and we’re thrilled that Ms. Roberts is still willing and able to contribute information to colorectal cancer research. In a recent phone interview with Ms. Roberts, we learned that she attributes her long life to “clean living and lots of hard work,” starting on the dairy farm where she lived as a child. In recent years, age has compelled Ms. Roberts to give up eating salads because raw vegetables are too hard on her digestive system, “and that breaks my heart because I’ve had salads all my life.” Unfortunately, cancer has also been a part of Ms. Roberts’ life for quite some time. She remembers her paternal grandfather died of stomach cancer, when she was eleven years old. Cancer diagnoses and treatment have been a part of her life for decades, and she has been a part of cancer research for years. Ms. Roberts herself has been diagnosed — and treated successfully — for skin cancer three times. But because many others before her have also shared their experiences with cancer research, it has helped to update the current scientific understanding of the disease. With every follow-up interview, we see how cancer behaves over time, and most importantly, how the condition might be prevented.

The generosity of Gwendellyn Roberts, and people like you, is why we at the CORE Studies are immensely grateful to talk to you every few years. “Almost everyone says I’m an inspiration,” Ms. Roberts says. “I’m almost 80 years old.” All of you inspire us to continue our work, no matter what your age. Wishing you all long and healthy lives.

Photo credit: Debbie Gallagher

CORE Studies Participant Gwendellyn Roberts

Body Weight & Life After Colorectal Cancer

It’s common for people with colorectal cancer to lose weight after being diagnosed with the disease. But providers often encourage cancer survivors to maintain a healthy weight, which can help with many other aspects of long-term survival. Researchers are also interested in understanding if body weight changes after colorectal cancer diagnosis are associated with long-term survival. To determine the relationship between weight gain or loss and colorectal cancer survival, Dr. Jonathan Kocarnik analyzed data on survivors who lived for longer than five years after being diagnosed. Other studies have measured body weight changes after colorectal cancer diagnosis, but generally just before diagnosis or around the time of treatment. Dr. Kocarnik’s team looked at participants’ self-reported body weight and height at the first interview, and then five years later. Their goal was to determine if people who lost weight within five years of diagnosis were more likely to pass away, regardless of the cause of death. This seems true, and the study suggests that the story keeps it off after treatment. “Increasing evidence suggests that the story isn’t as simple as once cancer has developed,” says Dr. Kocarnik. “In fact, some increased adiposity [higher weight] may actually be associated with increased survival within this context.”

In future studies, Dr. Kocarnik hopes his team’s findings can be confirmed for a variety of reasons. Researchers often don’t know if an intentional change in weight (versus weight loss due to cancer side-effects) makes a difference for people with colorectal cancer survival. Dr. Kocarnik also plans to see if diet, exercise, or the ratio of muscle to fat affects the likelihood of survival. To complete these in-depth studies, researchers all rely on one element: people like you, who are willing to update researchers over long periods of time. A resource like the CORE Studies project, Dr. Kocarnik says, is vital for helping cancer survivors live longer, healthier lives.
Sometimes, in the course of research, a study will discover that someone carries a cancer gene mutation that increases their risk of developing cancer. With that knowledge, participants in a research setting might request genetic testing to verify those findings. But there is a catch. Genetic testing for cancer risk is not equivalent to diagnostic testing for clinical purposes. Current guidelines strongly recommend that people who get research results have them verified in a clinical laboratory.

Our staff genetic counselor Dr. Mercy Laurino posed that question in a recent study that used data from a small group of CORE Studies participants. As some of you may know, we performed some genetic testing as part of the CORE Studies. When genetic testing revealed results that might affect a person's future healthcare, we offered participants the opportunity to speak with Dr. Laurino about what those results might mean for them. Later, she recontacted participants to find out if they'd had the CORE Studies results verified by a clinical laboratory.

For the most part, only about 15% participants followed up with a doctor or genetic counselor to verify the research project findings within 12 months of receiving results. However, the majority of participants did not pursue verification for two reasons. Some said they didn't have health insurance that would cover testing costs. Others didn't see much personal benefit, given their knowledge of their own disease and their family, in having the CORE Studies results verified. Laurino concludes future research will need to consider ways to help participants get past barriers that keep them from fully understanding their genetic testing results.

Alcohol consumption in general didn't seem to affect overall survival. But consuming wine appeared to make a difference. Drs. Amanda Phipps and Polly Newcomb examined CORE Studies data about the alcohol consumption habits of participants that diagnosed colorectal cancer before 1997 and 2007, including those who passed away between 2007 and 2013. They tracked the alcohol consumption of these participants who drank one or more than one serving of wine per day. As compared to those who drank less than one serving a week, the effect of wine consumption on colorectal cancer patients was stronger than one might expect. Although, the effect of wine consumption was strongest in men and former smokers.

As in many research projects, Dr. Phipps notes that answers from this study also bring up new questions. It also begs the question as to the possible benefits of wine consumption after colorectal cancer diagnosis. That's a question we haven't been able to address with our studies thus far, but we know the answer to that question is of great interest to colorectal cancer patients.

The conclusions from studies like these could influence future investigations. For example, findings from a study in the 2017 Journal of Molecular Genetics & Genomic Medicine show that people who drink a little more than one serving of wine per day have a 30% higher likelihood of surviving colorectal cancer than those who drink less. The study also notes that men and former smokers were more likely to survive colorectal cancer when they consumed wine.

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