

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

KEEPING OUR COMMUNITIES CONNECTED AND ENGAGED

ISSUE 34, AUGUST 2023

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Hello, Alabama! As the incoming Associate Director for Community Outreach and Engagement, I would like to greet you in the name of health! I am a daughter of Alabama, hailing from Brewton. I was born and raised in the Deep South, and I was trained as a nurse and nurse scientist at UAB. So, I am proud to return to “sweet home, Alabama.”

As a nurse first, I spend my days helping patients and communities find ways to better their health. My job is to help folks wherever they might find themselves and with whatever resources they have in hand. I am proud to join the O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center’s Office of Community Outreach & Engagement (OCOE) to do more of this work.

In the coming months, the OCOE will strategize ways to support you in your pursuit of health and wellness and how we can help you amplify the message to your family, friends and neighbors. It is my hope that we can take advantage of the power in people. People from all walks of life have valuable information and resources that can help us reach the goal of “life without cancer.”

I look forward to meeting and hear from many of

you at our Community Dissemination Institute, which will be held August 21 to 23, 2023, in Opelika. Let’s strategize to build better health and wellness in Alabama!

Your health and wellness partner,
Timiya S. Nolan, Ph.D., APRN-CNP, ANP-BC
Associate Director, Community Outreach & Engagement

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OCOE HOSTS WINDSHIELD TOUR FOR GILEAD PROGRAM OFFICIAL

The O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center’s Office of Community Outreach & Engagement hosted a windshield tour of several rural underserved communities in the Alabama Black Belt in April as part of an 18-month program called A Family Affair, which supports rural African American breast cancer survivors and their female family members.



Shannon Weber, MSW

Associate Director, Public Affairs for Global Oncology Corporate Giving at Gilead Sciences

The program has enrolled 31 breast cancer survivors from 10 counties in Alabama and Mississippi so far.

The windshield tour—a drive-through visual survey of a community or communities where teams literally drive around and observe so health professionals can see the environments of their patient population—highlighted the lived experiences of rural breast cancer survivors, including their distance from health care and resources. The tour was organized to coincide with a visit from Program Officer Shannon Weber, MSW, who serves as associate director for Gilead’s Public Affairs for Global Oncology Corporate Giving. Weber was very complimentary of the OCOE team, community partners and state.

The visit included a tour of Selma, Perry, Marengo, Greene and Sumter counties in Alabama.

The tour concluded with a return to Birmingham and a follow-up meeting with Community Advisory Board Chair Lauren Roberts, executive director of FORGE Breast Cancer Survivor Center.

A Family Affair will offer navigation, screening and psychosocial supportive toolkits for survivors. This program is made possible through funding by Gilead.

STAFF HIGHLIGHT: CORDIE WALKER

Cordie Walker began serving as the Grenada County coordinator in January of 2012 with ‘The Journey To Better Health’ program, a community based initiative designed to help individuals identify, monitor and manage their health conditions.

For many years, Walker had a strong desire to give back to her community by rendering services that would make a great impact. UAB presented that opportunity, and today, she continues the journey.

Walker believes OCOE grants her the opportunity to reach out to the community, encourage healthy

lifestyles and help people get in the mindset to focus on their overall health.

Walker is also a breast cancer survivor of nearly 30 years and feels that she now has the opportunity and platform to help educate others about screening options and risk factors. "I do it because of the disparities that continue to exist, and I want to be a part of making a difference in people's lives."

Walker's key cancer message is to "know your family's medical history, get the age-appropriate screenings and change the risks that you can control."



Cordie Walker
County Coordinator
Grenada County, Mississippi

"There were so many unanswered questions, and I often wondered 'why me?' Prior to my diagnosis, I never heard of any family members with breast cancer. Therefore, I did not know if I was at high risk."



Lyse A. Norian, PH.D.

Associate Professor, Dept. of Nutrition Sciences & O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center at UAB

Obesity and cancer: How they are connected

We all know that carrying too much weight is unhealthy for us. Excess body weight can lead to health problems such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and joint pain.

But did you know that obesity can increase your risk of developing cancer? So far, 18 different types of cancer have been linked to obesity. These include post-menopausal breast cancer, liver cancer, ovarian cancer, kidney cancer, colon cancer and pancreatic cancer. Five additional types of cancer (leukemia, non-Hodgkin lymphoma, head and neck cancer, and bladder cancer) were added to the list in 2023.

13 cancers are associated with overweight and obesity

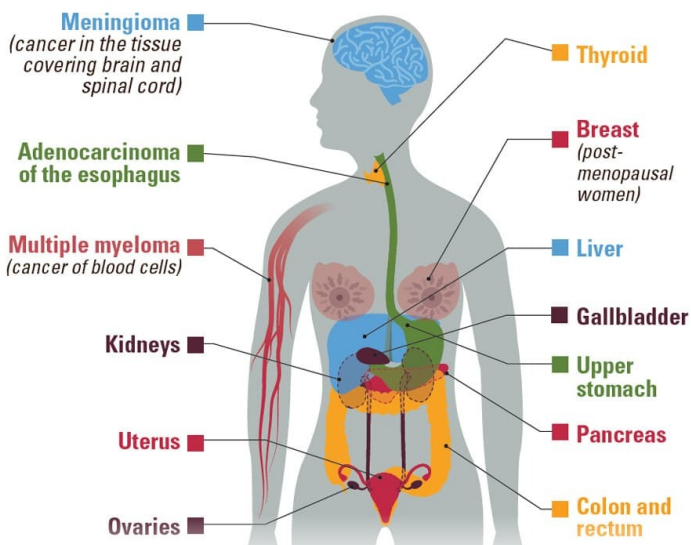


Image source: Center for Disease Control and Prevention

Although the links between obesity and developing certain types of cancer are clear, scientists and physicians still don't fully understand how obesity impacts cancer progression or cancer treatment outcomes. A core group of O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center researchers is focused on finding answers to these important questions and actively studying how obesity—alone or in combination with high blood sugar—impacts the spread of cancer throughout the body. We are also studying how obesity alters the body's immune responses against cancer. Many cancer patients are now treated with therapies that help their immune systems to recognize and kill cancer cells. So, it's critical for researchers to understand how obesity alters the ability of our immune systems to fight cancer, and how obesity affects cancer immunotherapy outcomes.

Data from the Norian laboratory have shown that for kidney and breast cancers, the immune system is less able to fight cancer when obesity is present. This is because obesity promotes the accumulation of harmful cells inside of cancers. These harmful cells counteract the protective immune cells that are trying to kill cancer cells. The net result is that obesity favors cancer progression. We are studying the pathways that cause these harmful cells to accumulate so they can be blocked. We have also found that in kidney cancer patients with obesity, cancer immunotherapy is less effective. We are now working to understand why this occurs, so that we can help develop new treatment approaches for cancer patients who have obesity. By understanding the specifics of how obesity influences the biology of cancer cells and our bodies' immune responses to them, our researchers hope to find new ways to help cancer patients lead longer, healthier lives.

DID YOU KNOW?

Alabama has the third highest rate of adult obesity in the United States. Obesity is clinically defined as a body mass index (BMI) greater than 30 kg/m².

**HEALTHY
RECIPE**

Blueberry Blast Smoothie

Smoothies have many benefits beyond good taste; they can help you eat more fruits and vegetables, the foundation of a cancer-protective diet. Rich in fiber, anthocyanins and ellagic acid, blueberries are being studied for their ability to inhibit the formation of carcinogens, which are substances that can cause cancer.

Ingredients

2 cups frozen, unsweetened blueberries (do not thaw)

½ cup 100% orange juice (calcium-fortified preferred)

¾ cup reduced fat vanilla Greek yogurt

½ medium frozen banana

½ tsp. pure vanilla extract

Directions

1. Place blueberries, orange juice, yogurt, banana and vanilla into blender.
2. Cover securely and blend for 30 to 35 seconds or until thick and smooth. For thinner smoothies, add more juice; for thicker smoothies, add more frozen fruit.
3. Pour into two glasses and serve immediately.