

The Society of MSK Campaign 2024–2025

# Pioneering Breakthroughs for Young Adults With Cancer

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# Pioneering Breakthroughs for Young Adults With Cancer

**Colorectal and gastrointestinal cancer diagnoses are rising worldwide for people under 50, and Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSK) is at the forefront of responding to this global health crisis.**

In 2018, MSK opened the Center for Young Onset Colorectal and Gastrointestinal Cancer, the nation's first program singularly focused on research and care for young people with cancer. Co-directed by Andrea Cercek, MD, Section Head of Colorectal Cancer, and Robin Mendelsohn, MD, the center has enrolled more than 4,000 patients since opening.

People diagnosed with cancer in their 20s, 30s, and 40s often face a range of complex issues that differ from those experienced by older adults. They include concerns about fertility and sexual health, career responsibilities, the care of children or aging parents, costs associated with medical care, and life after treatment. The center aims to address the needs of the whole person, providing patients with individualized care plans to treat their disease and support services to help them navigate challenges that may arise throughout their cancer journey.

Every person who comes to the center consults with a dedicated social worker and has access to professionals who specialize in psychiatry, integrated medicine, fertility, sexual health, and nutrition. Patients and their loved ones are also encouraged to attend individual and family counseling, support groups, and educational seminars.

Providing a full spectrum of care is just part of the center's purpose. Another equally important piece is pursuing innovative laboratory and clinical research that answers the most difficult question: Why is this rise in cases happening? In collaboration with a multidisciplinary team of experts across MSK, Dr. Cercek is exploring numerous possible causes and examining novel therapies to better treat patients.

Associate Attending, Solid Tumor Gastrointestinal Department of Medicine.  
Left to Right: Luis Diaz Jr., MD, Sascha, Avery, Imtiaz, Andrea Cercek, MD, Nisha





Andrea Cercek, MD, and Natasha Pinheiro, NP, reviewing scans in the clinic.

The Society of MSK's past support of colorectal cancer drove important advances in research and patient care. By investing in Dr. Cercek's forward-looking research through its 2024–2025 Campaign, The Society of MSK will continue to help pioneer breakthroughs for people with cancer around the world.

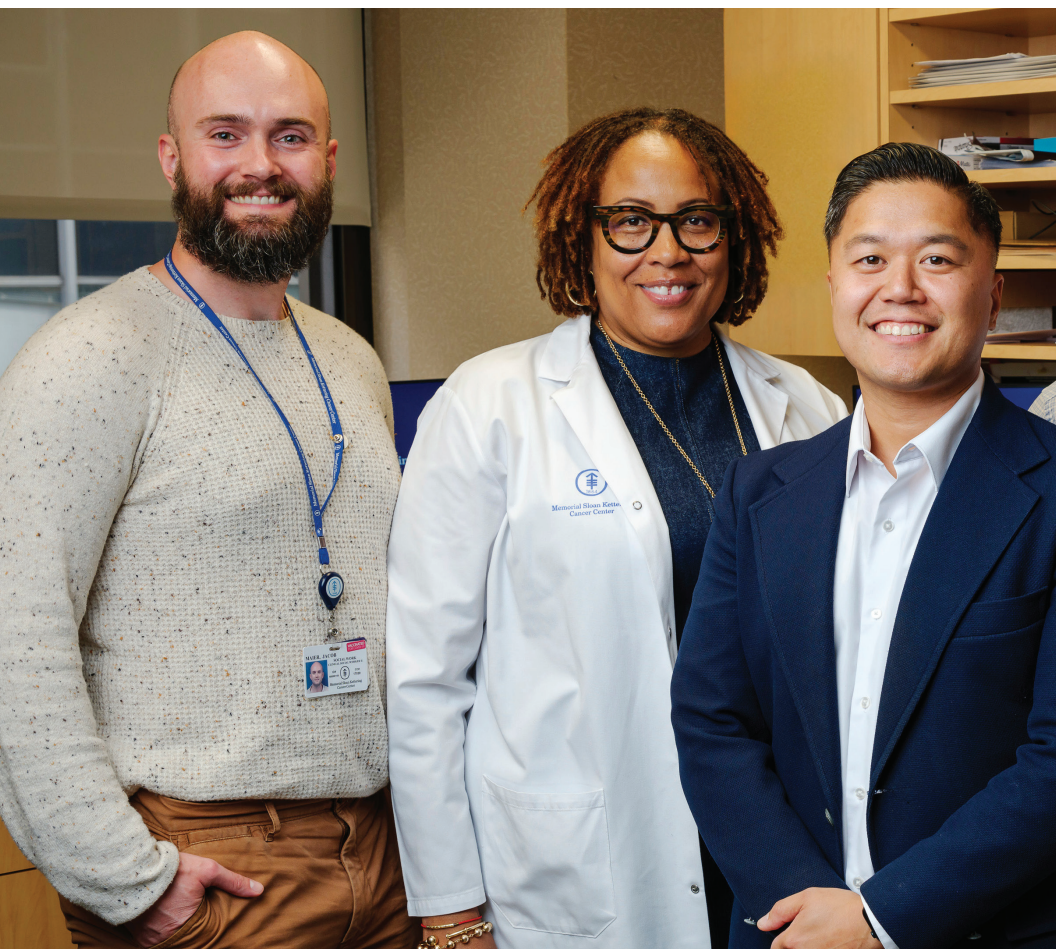
# A Revolutionary Clinical Trial

MSK made history in June 2022 when Dr. Cercek and her colleagues published remarkable results from a small clinical trial for people with stage 2 or 3 rectal cancer with a specific genetic marker called mismatch repair deficiency. Every person in the trial achieved complete remission — an unprecedented outcome that may change the standard of care. This new therapeutic strategy uses only immunotherapy, which harnesses a person's own immune system to find and destroy cancer cells. The results of the trial are especially encouraging for young people, since every participant so far has avoided chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery, all of which can cause life-altering side effects, including bowel dysfunction and infertility.

At the 2024 American Society of Clinical Oncology Annual Meeting, a premier event that brings together oncologists from around the world, Dr. Cercek shared updated results from this investigation. To date, 42 patients have completed treatment, and all of them have no evidence of disease.

# Uncovering the Next Big Discovery

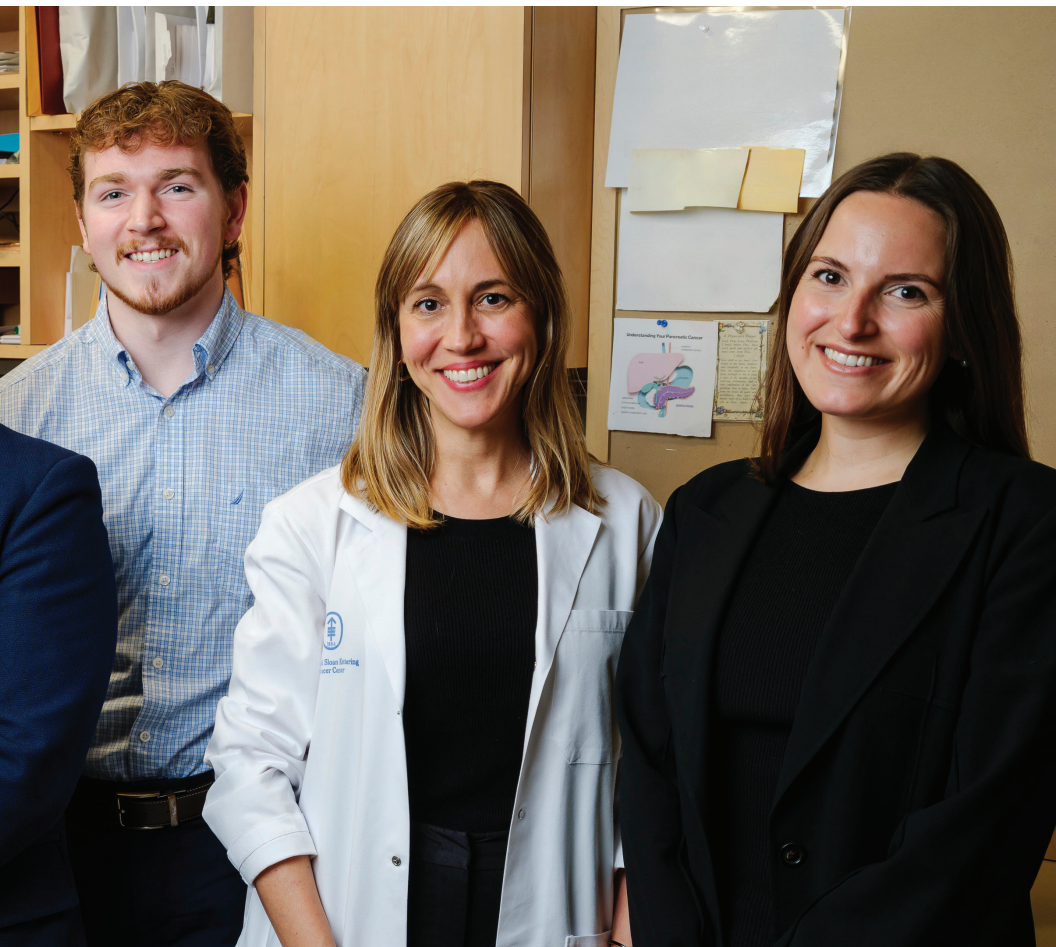
Discoveries made at MSK are changing lives, and more research will lead to even greater impact. Dr. Cercek is pursuing several areas of research in the lab and clinic to gain more insight into the cause and biology of early onset cancers and to develop next-generation treatments that improve patients' quality of life and survival. Philanthropy is vital to accelerating our progress.



## Identifying the Cause of Early-Onset Cancer

The biggest question remains: Why is this rise in cases happening? While there are many theories, little is actually known. Dr. Cercek and her team are investigating multiple possible factors, such as diet; lifestyle; medications; microplastics in the environment; and changes in the microbiome, the community of bacteria in a person's gut. Finding the underlying cause of disease can help physicians make more accurate diagnoses, create precise treatment plans, and identify opportunities for prevention.

Center for Young Onset Colorectal and Gastrointestinal Cancers  
Clinic Team: Jacob Maier, Clinical Social Worker II; Natasha Pinheiro, NP; Joseph Bacani, Clinical Nurse II; Brian Schneider, Care Coordinator; Andrea Cercek, MD and Hadley Maya, LCSW



To aid in this endeavor, MSK researchers collect and analyze patient stool and tumor tissue samples as well as require patients to fill out questionnaires about their childhood, lifestyle, and medical history. By gathering personal data, Dr. Cercek hopes to identify common risk factors among patients that could shed new light on possible causes. She is also pursuing many avenues of novel laboratory research and has a particular interest in advancing the following priorities:

- Looking at patients' intestinal linings on a molecular level to see how they compare to that of their healthy, similarly aged siblings who grew up in the same environment.
- Examining polyps that form in people after they survive colorectal cancer. This group is more prone to developing growths than their peers without cancer, which tells investigators something significant has changed within their body.
- Explaining an alarming trend: why more pregnant and postpartum women are being diagnosed with advanced colorectal cancer. Dr. Cercek seeks to determine if there is a link between hormones and disease development.

## **Developing Better Cancer Treatments**

In addition to searching for the cause of early-onset colorectal and gastrointestinal cancers, Dr. Cercek oversees several clinical trials at MSK that aim to discover less toxic and more effective therapies. These studies determine the safety and efficacy of a treatment, provide information on potential side effects, advance knowledge around a disease, and ultimately lead to new drug approvals. The 2024-2025 Society Campaign will support the following critical clinical trials led by Dr. Cercek:



## **An Expansion of MSK's Groundbreaking Immunotherapy Clinical Trial**

The revolutionary rectal cancer study that saw remission in 100% of patients continues in a phase 2 clinical trial. Dr. Cercek has expanded this study to include other types of cancer that are mismatch repair deficient, including esophagus, stomach, and gynecologic cancers, with the goal of treating them with immunotherapy alone and potentially avoiding surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation.

## **A New Treatment for HER2-Amplified Tumors**

The protein HER2 is essential to healthy cell growth but may be made in larger than usual amounts on some cancer cells, causing them to grow quickly and spread to other parts of the body. Dr. Cercek opened a study for patients with early-stage rectal cancer with HER2-amplified tumors. Patients with these tumors benefit from therapy that targets HER2, and the team hopes to improve responses to treatment that omit radiation and surgery with the goal of enhancing the quality of life for young survivors of rectal cancer.

## **Studying the Effects of Standard Cancer Therapies on Reproductive and Sexual Health**

The standard of care for most people with colorectal and gastrointestinal cancer includes chemotherapy and/or radiation, both of which can severely impact reproductive and sexual health. Through this study, Dr. Cercek wants to better understand the hormonal changes that occur in patients due to these treatments and find ways to diminish life-altering side effects.



# **Make a Difference: Support the 2024-2025 Society Campaign**

A cancer diagnosis during young adulthood can halt a person's momentum during a period of life typically full of discovery and growth. Today, there is an unparalleled opportunity to improve the lives of people diagnosed with colorectal and gastrointestinal cancer at an early age. A gift to The Society of MSK's 2024–2025 Campaign will advance Dr. Cercek's leading-edge research, driving innovations in the lab and clinic that have the potential to impact lives around the world.

**Thank you for your consideration and commitment to advancing MSK's mission of ending cancer for life.**



I am incredibly touched and grateful to The Society of MSK for recognizing the value of my work and investing in an evolving field of cancer research. Your philanthropy will drive our success, enabling us to take risks and pursue bold ideas that may help us answer some of our biggest questions.

**I am forever grateful for your generosity.**

— **Andrea Cercek, MD**, Gastrointestinal Oncologist

Center for Young Onset Colorectal and Gastrointestinal Cancers. Young onset colorectal cancer patient and Andrea Cercek, MD, Gastrointestinal Oncologist



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