

For Parents: Helping Your Child and Family Cope with Your Child's Cancer Diagnosis



Talking with your child about their cancer diagnosis is undoubtedly tough. Helping them cope with their cancer in the days to come will be challenging, too. You may also be wondering how you and your other family members will get through this time together. (And don't forget about yourself.)

Cancer can be difficult for your child and family members to grasp. Try to be patient and empathetic with every member of your family. It may take longer for some to process than others.

These conversations may be uncomfortable and difficult for you and your family. It's natural to feel overwhelmed. But know that you are not alone. Your child's care team can help answer any questions that come up.

Talking with your child about cancer

Often the first major challenge after the diagnosis is how to talk with your child about what this will mean in the coming months. Some of the most pressing questions may be:

- What is cancer?
- Why did I get cancer?
- Will I be OK?

How to answer these questions depends on your child's age as well as their ability to understand and process what you're saying. Regardless, it's important to be honest, direct, and patient. Here are some tips:

- When explaining cancer to your child, emphasize that cancer is not contagious. They didn't get it from anyone, and they can't pass it along.
- If your child asks why they got cancer, make sure to tell them they did nothing to cause this. It's not their fault.
- It's natural for your child to ask if they will get better. Many children know about cancer. They may even know or have heard of someone who died from it. Tell your child that while cancer is a serious illness, their care team is there to help them.

In talking with your child about cancer, be sure to also:

- Comfort your child by talking with them in a calm, soothing voice.
- Tell your child you'll ask members of their care team when you don't know the answer to a question.
- Give your child space and freedom to express whatever they may be feeling. Support their desire to lean on friends and other members of your family.
- Let your child take part in treatment decisions when possible. It's important for them to feel that they're an important part of the team with a voice in decisions. Encourage your child to ask questions.

For more information on how to talk with your child about cancer, check out this helpful site from the American Society of Clinical Oncology at www.cancer.net/coping-with-cancer/talking-with-family-and-friends/how-child-understands-cancer.

Comforting your child

Supporting your child through this experience can seem daunting. Consider these small things you can do to help your child feel safe and as comfortable as possible:

- Offer as much touch as your child wants. If you have a baby, frequently hold them. For children and teens, ask if they would like a hug or for you to hold their hand.
- Bring familiar objects from home whenever you take your child to the hospital or a clinic. This could mean their favorite toys, a blanket, a book, or a gaming device.
- If your child makes sense of their surroundings through touch, ask a nurse or healthcare professional if your child can touch the machines and objects involved in their treatment.
- Keep up as many routines as possible. Like the presence of familiar objects, continuing routines will help your child feel they're still connected to their old lives. Try to maintain eating and bedtime schedules as much as possible. This could also mean keeping up movie nights or any other fun, regular family activities.
- If they're old enough, discuss with your child what role social media should play during their treatment.
- Help your child normalize new routines. Work with their teachers and care team to create new education/treatment schedules. Be sure to also schedule time for play and socialization.
- Provide small gifts and rewards for your child to help them cope.

Caring for other members in your family

Everyone in your family will handle the news in their own way. It's important to give family members the space and time to do this. There's no right way to respond to a cancer diagnosis.

For other adults in your family:

- Create time to check in with one another. Discuss and validate each other's feelings.
- Use chores and errand schedules to delegate tasks. This will help show if any family member is doing too much and needs to offload some responsibilities. Ask other family members and friends to help when needed.
- Build time for one another, even if it's something as quick and simple as a walk. Being there for each other is vital during this time.

For any other children you may have:

- Keep them informed. They will feel more secure in their sibling's treatment if they understand it in whatever way they can.
- Reassure their feelings and reactions. Be sure to let them know that they didn't do anything to cause their sibling's cancer.
- Rely on friends and family members to help keep up your other children's routines.

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