

# For Teens: Navigating School When You Have Cancer



Finding out you have cancer is hard enough—no matter how old you are. As a teen, it's especially tricky. You're already juggling the complexities of school and getting ready to step into adulthood. Now, everything's a little more complicated.

Depending on your cancer and treatment plan, you may be able to keep going to school. Or you may need to take time off for your health. No matter your path, each step is about prioritizing your well-being and focusing on recovery. Here are some tips to help you along the way.

## Know your treatment

Understanding your treatment plan is the first step to figuring out how it might impact your school life. Take time to talk with your healthcare team about potential side effects, the schedule of your treatments, and how much time your body will need to rest. These details will help decide if you can continue to go to class and participate in school-related activities as normal, or if you need to take time off.

## Work with school staff

Once you know what to expect from treatment, update your teachers and other school staff. Don't worry, you won't be handling this all on your own. Your parents or guardians will be there to communicate with the school staff, schedule meetings, and explain the specifics of your condition. Plus, some hospitals have social workers to help you navigate your school plan.

When talking with your teachers, know that there are many options for you. Modifications may include:

- Shorter classes
- Less homework
- Online home schooling programs
- Skipping electives or non-essential courses
- Accommodations for testing
- Taking fewer classes
- Tutoring services

## Stay connected

Going through cancer treatment and recovery can sometimes feel isolating. But remember—you're not alone. Your friends and classmates are there to support you. Even if you need time off, you can stay involved through:

- **Virtual hangouts.** Use video call apps and group chats to connect with classmates when you're at home. Schedule phone catch-ups to stay in the loop.
- **Study buddies.** Pair up with friends in classes you might miss. They can share notes, updates, and even bring textbooks or assignments to your home.
- **School events.** If you're up for it, attend pep rallies, sports games, or music performances. Although you may have to miss that week of class, you can still stay connected.

Keep in mind that you might get different reactions from classmates when they hear about your cancer. Some may not know what to say, while others may have insensitive questions. You can prepare ahead for how you

want to answer their questions. It's OK to set boundaries and say you don't want to talk about it. Focus instead on the support from understanding friends and teachers.

## Get ready to go back

If you are just returning to class after treatment, consider these steps for an easier transition:

- **Prep your teachers and other school staff.** Have a parent or guardian talk with your teachers, administrators, school nurse, and counselors in advance. They can help set expectations and request accommodations, if needed. School staff should know how to help you in an emergency and if you need to take any precautions while at school.
- **Plan your response.** Decide what you feel comfortable sharing about your cancer and treatment with other students. Your loved ones can help you craft this message.
- **Surround yourself with friends.** Ask a few close friends to meet you outside so that you don't have to walk in alone. They can be a comforting presence after a long absence.

## Put your health first

In the midst of all these changes, remember that the most important thing is your well-being. Listen to your body and know when it's time to take a break. Don't push too hard.

If you run into memory, concentration, and learning issues, that's OK—mental changes can be a common side effect of cancer treatment. It doesn't mean you're any less intelligent. Go easy on yourself, but always tell your healthcare team, about any concerns or changes you notice. They may be able to adjust your treatment plan to best suit your needs.

Cancer may be an unexpected chapter in your school story, but it doesn't define you. You're not just a teenager with cancer; you're a teenager who's learning to overcome immense challenges. And every step, no matter how small, shows your strength and resilience. You've got this!

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