

Helping Kids Manage Cancer Treatment Side Effects



When you find out your child has cancer, you may feel a range of complex emotions, such as fear, anger, and uncertainty. While dealing with these feelings, you'll also need to learn how to support your child. This includes knowing how to help them handle the side effects of cancer treatment.

Because children's bodies are still growing, they react differently to treatment than adults. But just like adults, each child will experience their cancer treatment differently. Some might unfortunately deal with many side effects. Other children might have few or none at all. Your child's side effects depend on the type of treatment, dose, and type of cancer. Ask your child's healthcare provider what short- and long-term side effects your child can expect. Make sure you know what side effects to watch for and when to report them. The healthcare team can help you manage and maybe even prevent some side effects.

Use this information to help you through this challenging time. Don't forget to lean on your child's healthcare team for support, too.

Cancer treatment side effects

There are different kinds of cancer treatments. Each treatment can have its own set of side effects. These are some of the most common side effects that children might have:

- Tiredness
- Hair loss
- Nausea or throwing up
- Trouble eating
- Pain

Understanding how your child feels

Children aren't always able to explain what and how they're feeling as well as adults. It might be hard to know exactly why your child doesn't feel like eating, or if they're overtired. Here are some ways that might help children open up about how they're feeling.

Encourage open communication

Create a safe and supportive environment where your child feels comfortable discussing their feelings and experiences. Encourage them to share their thoughts, concerns, and any discomfort they may have. Let them know that it's OK to be upset, scared, or angry. Talking about their side effects can help them feel better.

Offer different ways to communicate

Not all children express themselves in the same way. Some kids may prefer drawing or writing rather than talking. Encourage your child to try different methods to communicate their side effects, such as drawing pictures, painting, writing in a journal, or using a feelings chart with emojis so they can point to a particular emotion.

Promote peer support

Connecting with other children who are going through similar experiences can help encourage your child to share their feelings. Support groups or online communities can provide a safe space for kids to discuss their

side effects and learn from one another. This can help your child feel less alone and more empowered to communicate their experiences.

Supporting your child

Here are the most common cancer treatment side effects and how you might help your child manage them.

Helping with tiredness

When kids feel tired from their cancer treatments, one of the best things to do is let them rest. Make sure they have a comfortable place to sleep and relax. Encourage them to take short naps during the day. Try to keep their bedtime routine the same every night. Help them find quiet activities, like reading or coloring, to do when they're feeling tired. Help your child prioritize their day so they have energy to do the things that are most important to them. Ask your child's provider what physical activities are safe for your child. Staying active can actually help relieve fatigue and improve sleep.

Dealing with hair loss

Your child's provider can tell you if your child is likely to lose their hair during cancer treatment. Losing hair can be scary and sad for kids. Talk with them about why it's happening. Let them know hair loss is normal during cancer treatments. Let them pick out a soft hat, scarf, or wig to wear if they want to cover their head. Your understanding and support will help them the most. Your child's provider can tell you if and when hair is expected to grow back after treatment is done.

Managing nausea and vomiting

Cancer treatments can make kids feel sick to their stomach or cause them to throw up. To help them feel better, try these ideas:

- Give them small meals throughout the day instead of 3 big meals.
- Offer them easy-to-digest foods, like bananas, toast, or applesauce.
- Keep them hydrated. It's very important to stay hydrated if they are vomiting. Have them drink water, clear juices, or sports drinks with electrolytes.
- Talk with their healthcare provider about medicines that can help with nausea and throwing up.

Helping with eating problems

Sometimes, cancer treatments can make it hard for kids to eat. They might not feel hungry. Or food might taste different and unpleasant. Kids might not want to eat the things they usually like. Here are some ideas to try so they get enough calories when they don't feel like eating:

- Offer small snacks throughout the day rather than large meals. Try snacks that are rich in calories and vitamins, like avocados, full-fat yogurt, trail mix, and nut butters like peanut or almond butter.
- If they feel like eating their favorite foods, let them. It's more important to get enough calories than for every item to be healthy.
- Make mealtime fun by using colorful plates or funny utensils like a spork. Give them a new cup or let them help cook.
- If they're having trouble swallowing, try foods with different textures. Soft or pureed foods, such as mashed potatoes, scrambled eggs, applesauce, or smoothies, might be easier to eat.
- Talk with their provider or a registered dietitian. They might have other suggestions.

Easing pain

Cancer treatments can cause pain for some kids. If your child is in pain, talk with their provider about medicines that can help. You can also try:

- Using a heating pad or ice pack for short periods of time on the painful area if approved by their provider.
- Giving them a gentle massage.
- Helping them find a comfortable position to sit or lie down. Use extra pillows and blankets to make a cozy spot for them.
- Encouraging them to do deep breathing exercises to relax.
- Distracting them from their pain. Distraction can be a good way to take your child's attention off their pain. Try using games, movies, or toys,

Always keep your child's healthcare team informed about any side effects they're having. In some cases, the healthcare team might adjust the treatment plan or provide additional support, like counseling or medicine, to give your child some relief.

Helping a child through their cancer treatment is hard. Your patience, flexibility, and creativity will go a long way in making your child more comfortable.

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