

# Cancer: Your Child's Inpatient Stay



An inpatient stay can be overwhelming for the whole family. You and your child will have to navigate a new and unfamiliar place. You may not know what to expect. But remember, you're not alone. A dedicated team of healthcare professionals will be there to help. And with this guide, you'll know what to expect. That way, you can focus on taking care of your child and yourself.

## Getting ready for your child's inpatient stay

A little preparation goes a long way when it comes to an inpatient stay. By planning for your child's needs, you have the power to help them feel safe and comfortable. Here is some advice to consider as you get ready for this time:

- Help your child with their feelings. Depending on your child's age, ask how they feel about their upcoming trip to the hospital. Listen calmly and validate their feelings. Your child depends on you to tell them accurate and truthful information. Recognize they will pick up on your tone of voice, your facial expressions, and emotions. Don't be afraid to admit that it's scary. But reassure them that you or someone they know will be there.
- Explain treatment to your child. Using words they understand, tell your child what to expect. Focus on treatment as a type of care and healing. Let them know you'll be there.
- Pack essentials and comfort items. These include toiletries and comfy clothes. You might also bring a stuffed animal, a blanket, toys, or music. Or bring some fun items to pass the time, like puzzles or books.
- Bring a current list of all the medicines, vitamins, and supplements your child takes. You may be asked to provide your child's medical and surgical history.

## Navigating the hospital

The hospital may seem overwhelming to you and your child at first. Keep these tips in mind:

- **Learn hospital policies and schedules.** Ask about visiting hours, meal services, and any other rules.
- **Ask for directions.** Use maps, guides, and hospital staff to navigate the facility. Locate important areas before you need to go there. That way, you can avoid the frustration of feeling lost.
- **Make use of resources and support.** Many hospitals offer educational materials, support groups, and counseling services. They may help your family cope during this time.

## Communicating with your child's healthcare team

Don't be afraid to speak up or ask someone to clarify a term or information you're given. If you don't understand what's going on, your child won't either. Keep these tips in mind to communicate with confidence:

- Ask questions and voice concerns. Share your questions and concerns with the healthcare team. They are there to help and support you.
- Stay informed and involved. Ask to talk about your child's treatment plan. The more you understand, the better you'll feel about making tough decisions. Your child's care team may include many different providers and specialists. Ask how the treatment team makes decisions together.
- Have family meetings. Regular family meetings can lessen the burden of sharing updates. Consider using technology to include any family members who can't be there.

## Supporting your child during treatment

There are many ways to give your child emotional and practical support during their treatment. You know best what they need. Here are a few things you can do to help ease their burden:

- **Managing side effects and discomfort.** Work with the healthcare team to address side effects. As your child's most important caregiver, you may notice things others can't. Your child may also find it easier to tell you when something is wrong.
- **Encouraging expression.** Keep talking to your child. Encourage them to express their feelings and experience.
- **Maintaining routines and normalcy.** As much as possible, try to establish routines during your child's stay. This provides stability and comfort.
- **If you see emotional changes in your child, get the extra help your child needs.** This may be a nurse, child life specialist, or counselor at the hospital.

## Taking care of yourself as a caregiver

Caring for a child with cancer can be exhausting. It can leave you feeling drained. Remember to take stock of your own well-being. Ask for help when you need it. Keep these tips in mind to care for yourself, so you can be there for your child:

- **Find time for emotional support and self-care.** Reach out to support groups, friends, and family members. Share your experiences. Take some quiet time to rest. Remember that it's OK to feel overwhelmed.
- **Balance work, family, and caregiving.** Demand less of yourself and delegate tasks to others. Ask for help. If you are employed, talk to your manager and human resources about leave options if needed.

## Returning home after an inpatient stay

Getting back to daily life after an inpatient stay can be hard for both you and your child. Be prepared as you navigate this phase. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- **Coordinating follow-up care and treatments.** Before you leave, talk with your child's healthcare team. Make sure you understand:
  - What your child's medicines are
  - How to care for any wounds or surgical incisions
  - How to use medical equipment, if needed
  - If your child has any diet or activity restrictions
  - Who to contact for any questions or follow-up appointments
- **Adjusting to life at home.** Be there for your child as they return to daily life. Keep talking. Understand that it takes time for things to get back to your normal routine.
- **Watching for complications.** Ask your child's provider what symptoms you need to report once your child is home. Trust your instincts when it comes to your child's health. Call your child's provider if you have concerns.

Navigating your child's inpatient stay can be a challenge. You may feel powerless at times. But good preparation and communication can go a long way toward making the experience more manageable. Use this article to guide you through the process. And remember, your child's healthcare team is there if you need them.

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