

How to Care for Your Loved One During Cancer Treatment



It's difficult when a loved one is diagnosed with cancer. And caring for them throughout their treatment can bring even more challenges. For instance, you may not be sure how to support them or what type of help they need. But you can play a vital role in helping your loved one get through treatment, no matter where they are in their journey.

You may think there's a checklist for how to be a good caregiver. But in reality, there are no set rules. Your role will be just as unique as your relationship with your loved one.

How should I prepare to be a caregiver?

If you know you'll be starting your role as a caregiver soon, it helps to prepare beforehand. Don't worry—you'll get better at handling challenges with time, and with support and understanding from others.

In the beginning, you may:

- Feel sad, anxious, or isolated
- Feel a loss of privacy
- Have less free time
- Need to balance your job responsibilities
- Deal with financial stress

It's OK to ask for help from friends, family, a therapist, and support groups. This can help you manage your time better and feel less stressed. Remember that different people might help you in different ways. And all forms of support can help you be a better caregiver to your loved one.

As you start your role as caregiver, try to learn as much as you can about your loved one's diagnosis and the details of their treatment. You may see some changes or side effects as they have treatment. These may be expected for the treatment they are getting. But side effects may become more severe. Ask the healthcare provider when they should be told if side effects get worse. Be sure you know the best way to reach the provider. This includes after hours, and on weekends and holidays.

Some common side effects from cancer and treatment are:

- Losing hair
- Losing weight
- Severe tiredness (fatigue)
- Nausea
- Having diarrhea
- Getting sores in the mouth
- Feelings of grief and regret

How can I help my loved one in their everyday life?

One of the best ways to support your loved one is by helping a little bit each day. But before you jump in, always ask if it's OK to help first. Your loved one's needs may change, so it's good to be flexible. Suggest certain tasks you can do, instead of just asking how you can help.

If your loved one finds it hard to accept help, let them know you're doing it because you care and you need nothing in return. And no matter what, they should always be included in decisions about their care.

Try to help with day-to-day tasks such as:

- **Running errands.** Create to-do lists. You might go food shopping, return books to the library, bring mail to the post office, or pick up medicine.
- **Making meals.**
 - **Shop for and prepare meals that are easy to digest.** Ask them what they like and what tastes good. This may change depending on their stage of treatment.
 - **Schedule a meal train by phone or online.** Friends and family can bring over meals on certain days. If your loved one's immune system is low, ask them to leave the meal on the porch or outside the front door.
- **Doing housework.** Help them with laundry, cleaning, or caring for their plants or garden. Cancer treatment may lower their immune system. So it is important to keep living areas clean to prevent infection. This is especially important for the kitchen and bathroom.
- **Help with personal care.** You may need to help with bathing, grooming, or dressing.
- **Childcare and pet care.** This may include watching their children, picking them up from school, or taking them on play dates. Offer to clean their cat's litter box, or take their dog for a walk.
- **Driving to and from appointments.** You can take notes for them at their appointment. Or just keep them company. If they're comfortable with it, you can help communicate their needs to their providers.
- **Encouraging them to stay physically active, if possible.** Talk with their healthcare provider before starting any new physical activity. Try going on a walk if your loved one is up for it.

Not sure what to prioritize? Make a list of tasks and do the most urgent ones first. Follow through with your commitments. But be careful not to take on too much. Building a support team of friends, family, and other caregivers is key. This will help you share some of the tasks and take time for yourself when you need it.

Have more time and energy to give? Some other ideas for practical support include:

- **Organizing and paying bills.** Just make sure your loved one is OK with you knowing certain financial details.
- **Making phone calls.** You can call their provider for them and ask questions about side effects. Or when you have a moment, share messages with friends, family, or coworkers about where they're at with treatment.
- **Keeping medicines straight.** Try using a personal health manager to help them stay organized.
- **Fundraising.** Arrange an event or set up an online donation page to help cover treatment costs.
- **Helping with paperwork.** Offer to fill out and mail legal or insurance documents.
- **Giving a small gift.** Think of ways to give them comfort right away or help their days run more smoothly.

It's good to remember that you're doing your best, and your best can change every day. Being a caregiver for a loved one with cancer is hard. You may find yourself so busy and concerned about your loved one that you don't pay attention to your own physical and emotional health. Taking care of your own health and getting enough rest will give you the strength to be a support to your loved one.

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