

For Kids and Teens: When Someone You Love Has Cancer



If someone you love has cancer, you may feel sad, angry, and confused. It's OK to feel this way. Cancer is a serious disease. Your loved one is sick, and they will need to see the healthcare provider a lot. It can help to learn more about cancer and how it's treated. And how it will affect your loved one and you. If you have any questions about your loved one's cancer, first ask your loved one. But you can also ask a relative or a healthcare provider.

What is cancer?

Cancer is when one of the body's cells starts to divide out of control. When the body's cells do this, they make many cells. These cells can create a lump called a tumor. Cancer can also be in the blood, such as in leukemia. In leukemia, the cancer cells grow out of control and push out the normal cells. This makes it hard for the healthy cells to fight infection, stop bleeding, and carry oxygen all over the body.

Healthcare providers are not always sure why cancer happens. This is especially true with childhood cancers. But they do know the causes of some types of cancers. For example, healthcare providers know that smoking can cause lung cancer. But even if they aren't sure of the cause, you definitely can't catch cancer like you can catch a cold. People can die from cancer, but every year healthcare providers are finding new ways to help people survive cancer. It's also important to remember that you can't cause someone to get cancer. If your mother has cancer and you were mad at her, you didn't make her get cancer.

Treatment

There are more than 100 different kinds of cancer. Treatment for each kind of cancer is different. Even 2 people who have the same type of cancer can get different kinds of treatment. Your loved one may have to go to the hospital for treatment. They may stay there for a while. The hospital may be far from your home. So you may not see your loved one very often. Or your loved one may go to a clinic that is close to home. At a clinic, your loved one gets a treatment and then goes home. Your loved one may have to go to the clinic a few times a week for treatment.

There are several kinds of treatment for cancer: surgery, radiation, chemotherapy, immunotherapy, targeted therapy, and hormone therapy. Many times, people have to have more than 1 type of treatment to kill the cancer. For instance, someone may have surgery. Then they will have radiation to kill any leftover cancer cells that the surgery didn't remove.

If you are curious about your loved one's treatment, you may want to ask if you can go with them to a clinic visit or another appointment. Your loved one may not want you to come. Or they may be happy that you want to go. Or it may not be possible to go if the clinic or hospital has special rules about visitors. But if you go, you can meet your loved one's healthcare providers. You can also ask them questions. It may be scary to go, but it will help you understand your loved one's treatment:

- **Surgery.** Healthcare providers use surgery to remove the tumor. If your loved one has surgery, they will have to stay in the hospital to recover. They may be there overnight, for just a few days, or longer.
- **Radiation.** This treatment uses beams of high-energy X-rays or other particles to kill cancer cells. It's a common part of cancer treatment. Some people who have had radiation say that it's almost like getting an X-ray. If your loved one has radiation, they will have to go to the hospital or clinic to get it. They will likely have to go a few times a week for treatment. Radiation often doesn't hurt when it's happening. But it may cause side effects, such as skin blisters or feeling very tired. Your loved one may need extra rest or care at home.
- **Chemotherapy (chemo).** This is when your loved one gets medicine to kill cancer cells. Your loved one may be given this medicine as a pill that they take by mouth and swallow. Or they may have a shot (injection) or get medicine through an IV (intravenous) tube. This is a small tube that can go in the arm, chest, or another part of the body so the medicine goes directly into the blood. There are several other ways your loved one may receive chemo. Depending on the type of chemo, your loved one may have to go to the hospital or clinic to get it.

- **Immunotherapy.** This is a type of treatment that helps the body's own immune system find and attack cancer cells. It uses substances that are either made in the body or in a lab. These substances may boost the body's immune system overall. Or they may help the immune system better target cancer cells.
- **Targeted therapy.** This therapy uses medicines that attack certain parts (genes) of cancer cells. These medicines target proteins or cell functions that help cancer cells stay alive, grow, and divide. They're different from chemo medicines. They may work when chemo doesn't. Targeted therapy focuses on cancer cells. These medicines mostly leave healthy cells alone. So the side effects are often different and less severe than those of chemo medicines. Targeted therapy medicine can be given as a pill. Or it can be given through an IV tube.
- **Hormone therapy.** Hormone therapy is a type of cancer treatment that changes the levels or blocks the actions of certain hormones in your body. Hormone therapy can be used to treat breast or prostate cancers that use hormones to grow. Hormone therapy may be given as a pill, a shot, or surgery.

What are treatment side effects?

Some cancer treatments have side effects. Side effects happen when the treatment tries to kill the cancer cells and it kills healthy cells by mistake. Not everyone has side effects. Side effects depend on the type of cancer and the treatment. Side effects often go away when treatment ends. But some side effects can stay. Common side effects include:

- Feeling tired
- Feeling sick to your stomach
- Throwing up
- Feeling sad a lot of the time (depression)
- Having a fever
- Having a skin rash
- Blood problems
- Hair loss

Sometimes cancer treatments can cause your loved one to lose their hair. This can look scary because we're used to seeing most people with hair. Hair most often grows back after treatment ends. If your loved one loses their hair, they may wear a wig or a scarf to protect their scalp. Or they may not wear anything. This may make you feel uncomfortable. Talk with your loved one about how you feel. You may even decide to get your head shaved so that you can be bald together!

What's going to happen to me?

If your loved one has cancer, your normal home routine may change. It's not going to be easy. Here are some things you can expect:

- **Helping out.** You may have to help out more around the house if your loved one has cancer. For example, you may have to set the table every night. You may have to help with a younger brother or sister, or clean the house. Your loved one will appreciate it if you can help. But you may feel upset with having more things to do. You may want to spend more time with your friends. If you feel like you have too much to do, talk about it with someone.
- **Missing loved ones.** When a loved one has cancer, they may have to go away for treatment. And if they are away from home a lot, chances are that another loved one is too. For instance, if a parent has cancer, your other parent or a close relative may also be away. They may be at the hospital, or they may have to work extra hours. Your well parent or the rest of your family and friends may also feel stressed out. They may not have as much time for you.

- **Strangers in your home.** Sometimes people with cancer need what's called "home care." This means healthcare providers will come into your house to give your loved one medical care. The care can be such things as medicines, exercises to make them strong, or changing bandages.
- **Others caring for you.** If one of your parents has cancer, your other parent may need extra help. This may mean that another relative will come to stay with your family. Or you may have to go away to stay with someone. This can be very hard. You will miss your family. But maybe you'll be able to do things with your relative who is taking care of you. They may take you to the movies or to the zoo. And they may be able to talk with you about how you're feeling.
- **Special treatment.** If your brother or sister has cancer, it may feel like they're getting special treatment. In a way, they have to because they're sick. But it may make you mad. You might get in trouble for doing something, but your brother or sister won't. Your parents likely want to do all they can for your sick brother or sister. It may seem like your sibling gets away with things because they're sick. It doesn't seem fair, but try not to let it bother you.
- **Friends.** Your friends may feel funny around you because your loved one has cancer. They may not want to make you feel bad, so they may not ask about your loved one. Or they may not understand cancer. They may tease you or think that they could catch cancer from you. It may help you to talk with your friends. There may also be times when you don't want to talk about your loved one's cancer. Or you may not want to see your friends. That's OK. But try to reach out to your friends. They will want to know that you still care about them. It's important to see your friends.
- **Talking about cancer.** If you feel sad or mad about your loved one's cancer and its effect on you, talk with someone. Your loved one's hospital may have support groups for kids and teens. There you can talk with other young people who have a loved one with cancer. Or it may help you to talk with a counselor. A counselor can help you understand your feelings. Many times counselors are in schools and can see you during the school day.

What will happen to my family?

Everyone's outcome from cancer treatment will be different. Some people may be cured and be cancer-free. Many people today survive cancer, but some people don't. Some people die. For some people who survive cancer, sometimes cancer can come back. You may wonder what will happen to your family if your loved one's cancer comes back or if they die.

- **Cure.** Some people with cancer can be cured. This means they don't have cancer anymore. Your loved one may be able to live life normally again after a while. They may still need to go to medical appointments once in a while to make sure they're doing OK.
- **Death.** When a loved one has cancer, they could die. Many people who have cancer don't die. You may be very scared thinking that your loved one could die. Your loved one may be scared too. If one of your parents has cancer, you may wonder what will happen to you if that parent dies. Chances are that your parents have thought about that too. Talk about how you feel and what you worry about. While young people worry about themselves in these situations, they also worry about their brothers and sisters, their pets, and leaving their friends. If you feel funny talking about death and what worries you with your loved one who has cancer, talk with someone else. Talk with a parent, relative, or teacher. But try not to hold it inside.
- **Cancer comes back.** Sometimes healthcare providers think that they have cured cancer, but it comes back. When cancer comes back, it often means that the cancer is serious. Your loved one will likely need stronger treatment. Again, it's important to talk about how you feel.

When someone you love has cancer, it can feel like your world is falling apart. It may be hard to do everyday things, such as going to a soccer game. But it's important. You should help your family when someone has cancer. But you should also help yourself. Talk about how you feel and try to do everyday things.

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