



What You Should Know About

PSYCHOSOCIAL ISSUES

CHILDHOOD CANCER has both emotional and physical consequences for a child and a family. Some of these emotional late effects may be positive, some negative, and some a mixture of both.

According to reports from teachers, peers, parents, and survivors themselves, childhood cancer survivors show the same or better psychosocial adjustment when compared with children in the population at large or with their siblings. In fact, even when the cancer or its treatment causes physical changes, a large number of survivors have positive feelings about their psychosocial adjustment after cancer. This happens with so many survivors that more research is being done to try to understand the phenomenon.

However, subgroups of childhood cancer survivors may develop:

- anxiety symptoms
- depression
- behavioral issues
- existential concerns
- sexual problems (see *What Parents Should Know About: Sexual Health*)
- learning difficulties (see *What Parents Should Know About: School and Learning*)

ANXIETY SYMPTOMS, INCLUDING POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD) OR RELATED SYMPTOMS (PTSS)

Childhood cancer survivors (and in some cases, their parents) may experience anxiety symptoms. These symptoms may be associated particularly with medical issues and get worse around follow-up medical appointments, or they may be generalized and affect school or social functioning. If your child:

- appears significantly anxious and is avoiding certain activities
- becomes highly anxious before medical appointments

- appears to have flashbacks or nightmares about past medical experiences
- has symptoms of panic (heart racing, sweating) in certain situations

he or she may benefit from meeting with a Perini Clinic psychosocial clinician.

DEPRESSION

Some childhood cancer survivors may experience depression:

- if cancer and treatment have affected an important area of the child's life (such as self-identity, self-image, or learning skills)
- during major life or family stresses
- if the child continues to suffer major health effects from the cancer or its treatment
- if the child has negative ideas about the cancer treatment and its outcome and/or has developed a negative self-image

Signs of depression include:

- negative mood (sadness, low tolerance for frustration)
- suicidal or self-destructive ideas or actions
- low motivation (lack of interest in usual activities)
- difficulty concentrating
- difficulty sleeping
- changes in appetite
- poorer peer relationships
- increased conflict with family

If you notice symptoms of depression, your child would likely benefit from cognitive behavioral therapy and an assessment for antidepressant medication.

BEHAVIORAL ISSUES

Behavior problems can be caused by many things, including cancer treatment and its effects. Other factors may include:

- developmental stage
- environmental stressors
- family and individual characteristics

Behaviors that might warrant concern include:

- being destructive to self or others
- engaging in risky activities (drug or alcohol use)
- acting out
- escalating family conflict
- experiencing social difficulties

If you notice behaviors like these, discuss them with your Perini Clinic psychosocial clinician or a local therapist.

INCORPORATING CANCER AND ITS EFFECTS INTO YOUR FAMILY'S LIFE

As noted earlier, childhood cancer diagnosis and treatment has emotional and physical consequences on a child and family. At some point in their lives, childhood cancer survivors and/or their families may find it helpful to talk with a therapist. A therapist can help them integrate the cancer experience and its consequences – both positive and negative – into the rest of their lives.

This integration process might include:

- grieving losses
- acknowledging paths not taken
- recognizing growth experienced and perspectives gained

If you have psychosocial concerns about your child, be sure to mention them during your child's Perini Clinic visit, or call to schedule a meeting with a psychosocial clinician between visits.