



CANCERcare®

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fact sheet

# HELPING YOUR LOVED ONE OR CHILD COPE WITH HAIR LOSS

**When people living with cancer lose their hair, they may express confusion, sadness, embarrassment, anger, fear and many other emotions. Caregivers and parents can help their loved ones cope with hair loss by being present and providing practical and emotional support.**

## FOR CAREGIVERS: HELPING YOUR LOVED ONE EXPERIENCING HAIR LOSS

### **Listen to and validate their feelings.**

Hair loss can elicit strong expressions of emotion as it signals a change in appearance that may impact self-esteem. In many cultures, hair can provide an exceptionally powerful sense of personal identity. Provide space for your loved one to process their feelings in ways that feel appropriate to them. Being present and listening can be powerful and help people with cancer feel supported.

**Provide practical support.** If your loved one is interested in a wig or a similar alternative, offer to help them find a local wig clinic in your community. As hair loss can leave the scalp vulnerable to sunburn and treatment can cause skin to be more sensitive to the sun, you can help your loved one find the proper sunscreen and skin care products. Talk to your loved one's health care team about local resources.

**Establish new routines and maintain existing connections.** Physical changes can make your loved one self-conscious, and hair loss can serve as an external marker of one's diagnosis and treatment experience. Ask your loved one what social situations they would feel most supported in. Consider engaging close friends and family in spaces of mutual comfort soon after hair loss occurs, as it can take loved ones time to adjust to physical changes as well.

**Stay active.** Encourage your loved one to do yoga, practice meditation, listen to music or engage in other activities of interest to them. Relying on existing physical and mental routines can give people with cancer a sense of control and confidence, and can serve as outlets for processing feelings. Doctors can help provide insight on exercise routines for people of various ability levels to improve self-esteem, strength and health.

**Talk to your loved one about joining a support group.** Support groups provide people with cancer a chance to meet one another and discuss commonalities and differences in their illness experiences. Groups can help people experiencing hair loss and other changing physical realities as people with cancer and professionals can share means of practical coping and provide emotional support. CancerCare offers free face-to-face, telephone and online support groups led by professional oncology social workers.

**Cope incrementally.** Feelings about hair loss may change over time. Wearing a wig or head covering may or may not feel comfortable. Both you and your loved one should take the adjustment process one day at a time, and practice patience and seek professional support to help you both to cope with the impact of hair loss.

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## TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT HAIR LOSS

**It may be helpful to keep in the mind the following when talking to a child about a parent or loved one experiencing hair loss:**

- Children benefit from simple and clear explanations that are easy to understand.
- Provide concrete, age-appropriate information when speaking. Explain that the medications that their loved one is taking to help manage cancer may cause hair to fall out, and distinguish that hair loss is a result of treatment and not cancer.
- Some children will want to hear more detailed scientific explanations, and others will be satisfied with general information. Answer your children's questions as accurately as possible. Take their age and prior experiences with serious illness into account. If you do not know the answer to a question, don't panic. It's okay to say, "I don't know. I will try to find out the answer and let you know."
- Oncology social workers can help you to find the best ways of engaging in these conversations given your child's age and developmental stage.

**Keep in the mind the following when helping a child understand their own hair loss as a side effect of treatment:**

- Children with cancer face unique challenges and make various adjustments to cope with them. Reassure children that hair loss is often temporary and explore whether they would feel most comfortable wearing a hat, scarf or wig.
- As a result of hair loss, children may feel sad, angry, embarrassed, scared or a variety of other emotions. Let children know that it is safe to express those feelings and provide space for them to do so through play, art and dialogue.
- Remind children that hair loss is an indicator that the treatment that is working hard to stop the cancer and make their bodies healthy again.



### CancerCare® Can Help

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include case management, counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by master's-prepared oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit [www.cancercares.org](http://www.cancercares.org) or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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