



CANCERcare®

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fact sheet

HELPING CHILDREN UNDERSTAND CANCER: TALKING ABOUT YOUR DIAGNOSIS

A cancer diagnosis has a profound impact on the entire family. It can be hard to know how much to share and what terms to use to help them understand. Talking about your diagnosis might be difficult and emotional in the moment, but will allow for open and honest conversations throughout your cancer experience.

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR CHILDREN

Set the tone. What you say is as important as how you say it. Use a calm, reassuring voice, even if you become sad. This will help your children see that you are doing the best that you can to cope and will help them do the same. It is important to reassure them that whatever they are feeling in that moment is okay.

Always give your children accurate, age-appropriate information about cancer. Take into account their age and prior experience with serious illness in the family. Don't be afraid to use the word "cancer." Tell or show them where the cancer is on your body. Practice your explanation beforehand so you feel more comfortable.

Remember that if you don't talk to your kids about cancer, they may invent their own explanations, which can be even more frightening than the facts.

Explain the treatment plan and how it will affect their lives. Tell your children what kind of treatment you will receive and how often. It might be helpful to create a treatment calendar. Prepare your children for any physical changes that might occur, such as hair loss, fatigue or weight loss. Let your children know that their needs will continue to be met and they will continue to be cared for. Be sure to inform them of any changes in their usual routine. For example, "Daddy will take you to soccer practice instead of Mom."



Answer your children's questions as accurately as possible. 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."

Reassure your children. Explain to them that no matter how they have been behaving or what they've been thinking, they did not do anything to cause the cancer. Let your children know that they cannot "catch" cancer like they can catch a cold.

Children can turn to members of your support system, too. Your support system might include your spouse/partner, relatives, friends, teachers, members of your religious community or members of your medical team.

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Let your children know that they can ask questions of these adults and talk to them about their feelings. If needed, ask your medical team if there are professional support services available at your treatment center for children. If not, determine whether they have local resources or referrals.

Allow your children to participate in your care. Give them age-appropriate tasks such as bringing you a glass of water or an extra blanket.

Make communicating with your children a priority. Try to make every effort to really listen to your children. This will show them how much you love them and help them to feel comfortable coming to you with their concerns in the future. Occasional family meetings can create an expected time to discuss their feelings. A question jar can be useful to children who are uncomfortable speaking directly about their fears.

Show your children love and affection. Let them know that although things are different now, your love for them has not changed. When helping your children cope with a cancer diagnosis, it's almost impossible to be prepared for every situation. Sometimes, you may not know what to say. This is normal and okay. Cancer can be overwhelming and disruptive, but it doesn't change the fact that you know your children best. Trust your sense of how to best support them during this time.



TALKING ABOUT FEELINGS

Children can have many different reactions when they learn that a loved one has cancer. They may be afraid or confused, or feel guilty or angry.

Let your children know that feelings are never wrong. Whatever they are feeling is okay and normal. It is also normal to feel one way one day and another way the next. Let them know that it is also okay to not always want to talk.

Tell your children that you, too, have a wide range of feelings.

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.cancercare.org or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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This fact sheet is made possible by Takeda Oncology*



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