



CANCERcare®
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Fact sheet

Helping Children Understand Cancer: Talking to Your Kids About Your Diagnosis

Your cancer diagnosis has a profound impact on your entire family. Not only do you have new information to learn and treatment decisions to make. If you have children, you're probably also concerned about how much to tell them about what you're going through.

Q What information do I need to give to my children in order for them to feel comfortable and secure?

A The best thing you can do for your children during this difficult time is to talk to them about cancer and help them with their feelings.

Here are CancerCare's 10 tips for communicating with your children:



- 1. Give your children accurate, age-appropriate information about cancer.** Don't be afraid to use the word "cancer." Tell or show them where the cancer is in the 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.
- 2. Explain the treatment plan and how it will affect their lives.** Prepare your children for any physical changes you might go through during treatment (for instance, hair loss, extreme tiredness, weight loss). Let them know that their needs will be taken care of (for example, Dad will bring you to soccer practice instead of Mom).
- 3. Answer your children's questions as accurately as possible.** Take into account their age and prior experience with serious illness in the family. If you do not know the answer to a question, don't panic. Say, "I don't know. I will try to find out the answer and let you know."
- 4. 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 them know that they cannot "catch" cancer like they can catch a cold.
- 5. Let your kids know they can turn to other members of your support system, too.** These people include your spouse or partner, relatives, friends, clergy, teachers, coaches and your health care team. Tell your children that they can ask questions of these adults and talk to them about their feelings.
- 6. Let your children participate in your care.** Give them age-appropriate tasks such as bringing a glass of water or an extra blanket.
- 7. Encourage your children to express their feelings.** Let them know that they can express any feelings, even those that are uncomfortable. Let them know, too, that it's okay to say, "I don't feel like talking right now."

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8. **Reassure your children that they will be cared for.** Tell them that even if you can't always provide the care directly, their needs are important and will be taken care of.
9. **You may have less energy, but use what you have to communicate with your children.** Make sure you understand what your kids are asking, and make sure they always understand what you are saying.
10. **As always, show your kids a lot of love and affection.** Let them know that although things are different, your love for them has not changed.

Talking About Feelings

Children have many different reactions when they learn a parent or relative has cancer. They can be afraid or confused, or feel guilty or angry.

Let your kids know that ...

...feelings are never wrong.

...whatever they are feeling is okay and normal.

...it is even normal to feel one way one day and another way the next.

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



When helping your kids cope with your diagnosis, it's almost impossible to be prepared for every situation. Sometimes, you may not know what to say. This is normal and okay. Coping with cancer may leave you feeling vulnerable, but **remember: you are the expert on your children.** Cancer can be very overwhelming and disruptive, but it doesn't change the fact that you know your children the best. Trust your sense of how to best support your kids during this difficult time.

CancerCare for Kids® Can Help

CancerCare for Kids® has a staff of professional oncology social workers that can help your family cope with a cancer diagnosis. Our social workers understand children's needs and offer support and advice to parents.

We also offer:

- Individual counseling and support groups
- Educational materials
- Practical help
- Financial help

All our services are **completely free of charge** and available in person, over the phone or online.

