

Talking to Children about Cancer

A cancer diagnosis can have a major effect on your family. Adults often want to protect children from feeling sad, worried or scared. Finding the right way to explain what a cancer diagnosis means to children can be hard. This handout will give you some tips that can guide you through these conversations.

Key points:

- Set aside time and find a quiet place to talk. Talking to your children about cancer will likely be several conversations over time. Too much information at once can be overwhelming.
- Try to be open and honest.
- Your child's questions can help you to know what information to share. Answer questions in a simple and concrete way.
- You know your child best, share with them what you believe is most important.
- Be comfortable in saying "I don't know", "we don't know right now" or "I will tell you when I know".
- Look out of your child's reaction, and ask them about it. Name feelings (for example: sad, angry, worried) and let them know you understand. Let them know you are always willing to talk.

How do I explain my cancer diagnosis?

Try to keep your child informed. Children can often sense when they are not being told the whole truth. As a result, children may worry and make up false ideas about what is happening. The information you share can depend on your child's age and development, and what they already know about cancer from school, the media or others.

Let your child know all or some of the following information:

- The name of the illness
- What part of the body is affected
- How it was discovered
- What will be done to treat your illness
- Changes they might see in the way you look or feel, for example hair loss or feeling tired.

Remember to explain that:

- Cancer is not contagious. Others cannot 'catch' cancer, like a cold or flu.
- Cancer is not their fault. Nothing they did has caused your cancer.
- We don't always know why cancer develops.

How do I explain what will change?

Try to assure your children about the parts of their normal routine that will stay the same. For example, going to school, doing homework and after-school activities, or spending time with friends. Tell them about what will change too. For example, if a nurse will start coming to the house, or if someone different will drive them to school. They may also wonder about how they can help out. Let them know ways they can help, such as making their bed every morning or cleaning up their toys after they are done playing.

What can I do to help my children during this difficult time?

- Try to set cancer aside and spend time doing something you all enjoy together. This can help ease their worries.
- You may want to share information with your child's school officials. They can provide support and look out for changes at school.
- Your child may not know how to react right away, or may not want to talk about it. Give them time and show them you are there when they are ready. You can set up a regular "check-in time", when you share with each other how you are both feeling. This gives the message that you are there for each other.
- Assure your child that they can talk with a peer, friend or someone they trust if they wish.

How to explain the different types of cancer treatments

- **Surgery** is an operation where doctors remove the cancer by carefully cutting the tumour out of the person's body. The person goes to a hospital for the surgery and has special medicine so that they don't feel it.
- **Radiation therapy** is the careful use of x-rays to make the bad cells go away. The rays can come from a machine or from special materials placed in or near the cancer.
- **Chemotherapy** uses special drugs or medicines to treat cancer. They can be given as pills, injections, or IV. The drugs are carried by the blood to each cell in the body, to reach cancer cells wherever they are.

- A **Stem Cell Transplant** uses stem cells found in bone marrow or blood to fix cells that have been destroyed by high doses of chemotherapy. Stem cells can come from the patient or from donors, like family members. The stem cells are given through an IV.
- **Hormone therapy** adds, blocks, or removes hormones from the body to slow or stop the growth of some cancers. It can be given as a pill, injection, skin patch, or sometimes surgery to remove glands that make specific hormones.

Other Resources

A **social worker** can offer you guidance and support. Make an appointment with a social worker at the Cancer Centre or hospital by asking a member of your cancer care team for a referral.

The **Patient and Family Resource Centre**, located on Burr 0 at the Cancer Centre, has books for adults and children on coping with cancer in the family.

There are also some useful Internet resources, including:

- www.virtualhospice.ca - search Talking with Children and Youth about Serious Illness—click on the first link—scroll down to Developmental Stages. This resource explains what a child understands about illness in each stage of development.
- www.dana-farber.org/Adult-Care/Treatment-and-Support/Patient-and-Family-Support/Family-Connections/Information-for-Parents/Talking-with-Kids-about-Cancer.aspx - some more tips for helping children.
- www.bccancer.bc.ca – click Patient/Public Info—Coping with cancer Emotional support—Cancer and the Family. Here you will find several fact sheets.
- www.cancer.org – search: helping children when a family member has cancer.