When Your Brother or Sister Has Cancer

Adapted from a booklet prepared by Laura A. Rudolph for the Children’s Orthopedic Hospital and Medical Center, Seattle, Washington.
This book is for you because you’re important.

Being the brother or sister of someone with cancer can really be hard. Cancer is a serious disease, and it can be hard to understand. Plus, there are a lot of things doctors still don’t know about cancer. So it’s hard to know what will happen.

It’s normal for you and your family to be worried or upset. Here, we talk about some of the thoughts and feelings you may have. Some may seem bad, but they’re all OK to feel and OK to talk about!

If you have questions or worries about your brother or sister, please talk to a grown-up. It might be your parents, or a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or another grown-up you are close to. They can help you, or maybe find someone at the hospital who can. The doctors and nurses will be glad to answer any questions you may have.

Finding someone you can talk to is a good way to start feeling better.

At first it’s hard for everybody. But once your brother or sister is in remission – which means the cancer is under control – everyone will feel much better.
The first few weeks

When kids have cancer, it can be hard for everybody in the family. Many times the sick child will have to stay in a hospital for a while to get special tests and treatment.

Usually when kids are in the hospital, one parent stays with them or spends a lot of time with them. Their other parent may also stay in the hospital or spend a lot of time going back and forth. Brothers and sisters may need to stay with friends or family during this time. You may feel left out and not really know what’s going on. And it can be hard to not see your parents as much as you’re used to.

Things are usually less busy after the first few weeks. Children with cancer tend to leave the hospital and then get their treatments by going to a clinic or doctor’s office. Sometimes they need to go into the hospital for treatments, but in many cases this is only for a short time.

We hope those times that your brother or sister feels sick will be short. Soon they may be up doing everything they used to do.
Worrying about your brother or sister

You may really worry about your sick brother or sister. You may even worry about whether your brother or sister will die. Cancer treatment is tough to go through. It has to be strong to stop the cancer cells, but it’s hard on the good cells, too. It hurts to see someone you love lose hair, gain or lose weight, or not feel good.

You may feel strange about feeling good and being able to go out and do fun things while your brother or sister is stuck at home feeling bad. But it’s important for families to try to live as normally as possible. It’s important for everyone to try to keep doing the things they’ve always done.

Feeling sad

You may feel sad sometimes. You might see your brother or sister not feeling well enough to do things they usually like. They might feel bad and even cry. It’s a sad thing for someone you love to get sick and have to get tests done and take lots of medicine. But this time of sadness usually goes away when your brother or sister starts to feel better and things at home get back to the way they were before cancer. When everyone else feels better, you’ll feel better, too!

Doctors have good medicines and treatments for cancer, and most kids with cancer will get totally well. So, while you may feel sad or worried sometimes, it’s OK to think everything will work out.
Feeling guilty

Sometimes you might feel guilty. You may wonder if you did something or said something to make your brother or sister get cancer.

Remember that just because you think or even wish something, that doesn’t make it happen. People sometimes have bad thoughts about
others, especially when they’re mad at them! This is normal, and everyone does it every now and then. Cancer is a mystery. No one knows for sure why it happens to some kids and not to others. But one thing is for sure: You did not do anything to make your brother or sister get sick or get cancer.

Josh’s little sister, Patty, was diagnosed with rhabdomyosarcoma, a muscle tumor. The week before she was diagnosed, the two of them were playing. Patty grabbed Josh’s controller away from him. Josh got really mad, and yelled, “Patty, I wish you weren’t here! I wish something would happen and you’d have to go live somewhere else! Then you couldn’t take my stuff and mess up my game!” When Patty was diagnosed with cancer and had to go into the hospital, Josh felt awful. He blamed himself and thought that he caused the cancer because of what he said. He finally told his parents about what he had said, and they told him that he had nothing to do with Patty getting cancer, which was true. This made Josh feel much better.
Feeling jealous and left out

Sometimes you may find yourself feeling jealous of your sick brother or sister. This is not surprising. Missing school, getting lots of attention, and spending extra time with mom and dad can look like a pretty good deal! And sick kids sometimes get presents and special treats, too. People want to do things to help them feel better.

Even though you know that your brother or sister needs this extra care and attention right now, it can be hard to accept.

Many times, brothers and sisters feel jealous, left out, and even think people don’t love them as much as the child with cancer. Feeling like this may then make you feel bad, too. It’s important to remember that it’s normal to feel this way. Also remember that you are loved just as much as your brother or sister. If you were sick, you would get lots of attention, too.

It’s OK to feel upset sometimes. It’s normal to feel jealous, and it’s OK to talk about these feelings. You don’t need to feel guilty about feeling this way, and you don’t need to keep these feelings inside you. Most kids with a sick brother or sister feel the same way.
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Ronnie’s little sister, Donna, had cancer. It seemed like she got all the attention. It was even harder for Ronnie because he had to stay with an aunt he didn’t really like while his sister was in the hospital. He felt left out, jealous, and thought his parents didn’t love him anymore. He didn’t want to talk to his parents about it because they already had a lot to worry about, and he felt bad for even thinking this way.

But, when Ronnie’s parents noticed how quiet and sad he was, they asked him to talk about how he felt. It made Ronnie feel much better to see that his mom and dad really did love him just as much as they always had. They were worried about him, too, and wanted him to talk to them any time he needed to.

Jocelyn’s brother, DaVon, has leukemia (a type of blood cancer). Jocelyn had a slumber party planned for Friday night, but DaVon got sick and had to go to the hospital. Jocelyn had to cancel her party and stay with her aunt and uncle all weekend. It wasn’t fair! She was really mad. She was mad at DaVon; she was mad at the leukemia; she was mad at the world!
Feeling angry

Your brother’s or sister’s cancer can, and will, upset everyone in your family. It can make people angry because no one knows what to expect. One minute everything is going well; then suddenly it’s not. You may also feel afraid. This is an important feeling to share because everyone in your family probably feels this way, too. If you let it out by talking about your anger or fear, it often seems to get better or even go away for a while.

When Jennifer’s sister, Mary, was first diagnosed with leukemia, her mother drove back and forth to the hospital every day to see her. One evening, Jennifer’s mother got really mad at her when she didn’t clean up her room like she was supposed to – much angrier than usual. This made Jennifer feel bad, and she wondered if her mom thought she was a bad daughter. But later her mother said she was sorry. She said she really wasn’t angry at Jennifer, but was worried about Mary and very tired. She apologized for taking it out on Jennifer. Later, Jennifer and her mother talked about how they were both worried and how they could help each other through this time.
Worrying about what goes on in the hospital or clinic

Hospitals and clinics can be pretty scary places. Your parents or your brother or sister may have told you about some of the painful tests or treatments that kids with cancer have to go through. Maybe they described some of the big machines in the hospital. Sometimes just hearing about things that are new and strange can scare you and make you worry about what really goes on in hospitals. You might imagine all sorts of things!

If this worries you, ask if you can go to the hospital to see for yourself. There may be someone who can show you around the hospital and answer your questions. Many hospitals also have take-home booklets or websites that show you the hospital and what treatment is like. Talk to your parents about what you’d like to know so you can better understand what’s happening to your brother or sister.

Brianna was very worried about her little brother, Tommy. She was worried he was going to get burned or be hurt when she found out he was getting radiation therapy. Brianna was really upset until her dad took her to the radiation department, and she talked to the doctors and nurses there. She was happy to learn that radiation treatments were quick and didn’t hurt at all!
Worrying that you or your parents might get cancer

Sometimes when you’re really upset about things, you can feel a little sick yourself. Your stomach may feel upset, or you might have trouble sleeping. Maybe you have bad dreams, or just don’t feel like doing anything. You may not want to go to school. You might want to be around your mom or dad more. You may be worried that you or other people that you love will get cancer, too. It’s normal to feel these things. As you adjust to the changes that are going on, these things should get better.

It helps to know that cancer is not like a cold. You can’t catch it from other people or from animals. It’s something that just happens, and no one really knows why. Cancer is not something that can be spread so that everybody in a family can get it. And it almost never happens that two kids in the same family get cancer. You don’t need to worry that you or your parents will get cancer. But if you feel sick or worried, talk to your parents about it so you can get help to feel better.

Missing your parents

You’ll probably miss your parents if they have to be away a lot during hospital stays or clinic visits. Sometimes it helps to talk to your mom or dad on the phone, or text, write notes, or email back and forth. You might ask to stay with a favorite person, someone you really want to be with, who can help you feel less lonely. Another thing you might do sometimes is go to the hospital to visit, if it’s OK with the hospital.

When your brother or sister isn’t in the hospital or going to the clinic a lot, maybe you can ask for a little extra time with your mom and dad.
Worrying about your parents

Having a child with cancer is hard on parents. Because parents love all their children very much, it makes them sad if any of their kids are sick, have to go through things that hurt, or have to stay in the hospital. It’s really hard on parents if they’re worrying about lots of other things too, like work, taking care of the house, or having enough money to pay the bills.

Parents also worry about being there when each of their children needs or wants them. Your mom wants to be with you at home and at the hospital or clinic with your brother or sister. Your dad has to make the same tough choice about where to be. They have to keep going to work, too. There’s no good way to fix this problem. You know people can only be in one place at a time!

Sometimes these rough times can help you grow and even lead to good things in a family. Helping each other, loving each other extra hard, and trying to understand each other’s feelings can make you all feel closer.
Between you and your parents

Maybe you should ask your parents to read this and talk to you about it – or maybe you can read it together. This might make it easier for you to talk about your worries. You can tell them how you feel, and you can listen to what they have on their minds. Even though having a brother or sister with cancer is hard, sharing your feelings with your family is special.
It’s hard to have a brother or sister with cancer. It affects you and your whole family, too. Here we will talk about how you might feel and what you can do about it.

For cancer information, day-to-day help, and emotional support, visit the American Cancer Society website at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org) or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We’re here when you need us – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.