

Tip Sheet:

How Your Cancer Treatment May Affect Your Children

When a parent is diagnosed with cancer, the whole family is affected. Everyone needs to adjust to changes in roles and routines.

Many parents tell us they are concerned about how their diagnosis and treatment will affect their child or children. No matter their age, children will need help understanding what is happening. Every family's situation is unique, and you will find your way to cope together.

Maintain connection and trust

Encourage your child or children to share their questions, feelings, and fears. Try to be open and honest. Children generally feel less anxious when they are included. Telling your child about a cancer diagnosis is better than having him or her overhear it or imagine the worst. At the same time, what you say will depend on your child's age and how he or she generally copes.

Breaking the news

It may be hard to think about having this first conversation with your child. Here are some tips.

Before the talk:

- Research suggests that it's helpful to tell your child soon after being diagnosed. However, you are the best judge of this timing. Some parents want more information and a treatment plan, while others prefer to share sooner.
- Discuss your goals for the talk with your partner, spouse, or other adult who may be there.
- Practice or write down some important things you want to say.
- Take stock of your own feelings and fears before talking openly about cancer with your child.
- If you have more than one child, deciding whether to share the news together or one-on-one may depend on your children's ages. Some people find that talking as a family, even with different-aged kids, works well because the children feel they're all in this together. You can give the older kids more details later.

During the talk:

- Use a calm and hopeful voice to explain what's going on.
- It's OK if you are still gathering information about your illness. You could say, "We don't have all the answers, but here's what we know." If you're stumped by a question, you might say, "Good question. I don't know, but I will find out."
- You don't have to discuss everything at once. This is a start that opens the door for conversations over time.
- Ask your child or children what they know about cancer. You can say there are many types of cancer and treatment, and everyone has a different experience.
- With a younger child, you might ask about concrete things he or she has noticed. For example, your child may have seen that more family members are around. Use a doll or stuffed animal to show preschoolers where the cancer is in your body.

- Assure your child or children that they did not cause your cancer, they will not catch it, you will always love them, and you and others will take care of them.
- Encourage your child or children to express their feelings, and explain that their worries are normal. It's fine to be sad or cry yourself, but it's best to focus on them.
- Some children may not feel comfortable talking at the moment or may take longer to adjust to the news.
- Children will often let you know when they've heard enough. For example, after a few minutes, a young child may say, "Can I have a snack now?"

During treatment and beyond:

- Consider setting aside a regular check-in time for questions and updates.
- Naming feelings can be useful. Your partner might say, "I was a bit scared today because mom was having her first chemo, and I wondered how it would go."
- Prepare your child for possible side effects of your treatment. You might say, "The chemotherapy may make my hair fall out, but it will grow back, and you can help me pick out scarves and hats."
- Notice changes in your child's moods or behaviors. For example, your son or daughter may be unusually clingy, angry, sad, or withdrawn, or do poorly in school. Find a quiet moment to ask what's going on. Your child's mood may have nothing to do with your health.
- Children's reactions may change during your illness. A child may go from supportive to resentful about your cancer's impact on his or her life. Agree that the situation is unfair and work on solving problems together.
- Remember that kids are quite strong. Many families grow closer during a parent's illness.

Questions about death:

Your child may ask if you're going to die. Most parents dread this question because they're not sure what to say, or how their child will react. It's helpful to explore your child's worries. You might ask, "What makes you ask that question now?"

How you answer may depend on your child's age and your diagnosis. Consider saying something like, "People do sometimes die from cancer, but lots of people don't. My doctors and I are doing everything possible to take care of me." Share positive news about your health whenever you can. When you speak calmly, focus on how you will live, and address their concerns directly, you send a message that your family will cope with whatever comes.

Practical matters

- **Maintain routines:** Continue your family routines and rules (around mealtimes, bedtimes, etc.) as much as possible, even if other people are helping out. Structure helps kids feel safe and supported. Encourage your child or children to continue seeing friends and doing activities, because having fun helps them recharge and de-stress.
- **Develop a support network:** It can be hard to ask others for help, but doing so can reduce your stress and teach children that families don't have to face troubles alone. For example, you might have a friend or relative drive your child to soccer practice or prepare a dinner.

- **Contact the school, other adults:** Consider contacting one or more key people at your child's school (principal, teacher, guidance counselor, etc.) who can provide support during your illness. You might alert other trusted adults, such as neighbors, coaches, or clergy members. Tell your child that you are sharing information about your illness with these adults, and encourage your child to talk with them, too.
- **Connect with your kids:** Find ways to share relaxed time with your child or children, such as playing cards or watching a favorite TV show. This gives them a chance to express feelings and questions. Think of ways your children may want to help at home.

Resources at Dana-Farber

Family Connections

The Family Connections program supports families when a parent has cancer. Call **617-632-2605**, email family_connections@dfci.harvard.edu, or visit www.dana-farber.org/familyconnections. For children and teens, the program provides backpacks with materials to comfort and encourage expression, while parents get binders with tips about adjusting as a family. Backpacks and binders are available from the Blum Patient and Family Resource Center (first floor of the Yawkey Center) or through a Dana-Farber social worker (call **617-632-3301**).

Your care team

Tell your Dana-Farber care team if you are worried about your child or children. They can help find a counselor or suggest programs for children whose parents have cancer.

Blum Patient and Family Resource Center

The Blum Center, on the first floor of the Yawkey Center, is a comfortable place to learn more about cancer and its treatment. Stop by, call **617-632-5570**, or visit www.dana-farber.org/resourcecenter.

For more information

To access the internet during your visits to Dana-Farber, consider using one of the free computer workstations in the Blum Patient and Family Resource Center, or borrow an iPad from the Shapiro Center for Patients and Families. Both centers are on the first floor of the Yawkey Center.

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