

Talking to Kids about Cancer

Many people are afraid to mention the word ‘cancer’ to children. If someone important to your children has cancer, you may not know what to say.

If you or someone else they love has cancer, it’s important to talk with your children soon after the diagnosis to help them understand what’s happening and to build trust. If your children know you’ll always tell them what’s going on, they’ll feel less afraid. Kids feel scared and alone if they are told that “everything is fine,” because they know this isn’t true. They notice whispering, crying, changes in meal schedules and other household activities. Children have vivid imaginations, and the things they imagine are even worse than reality.

Make sure to have frequent conversations in the days and weeks that follow diagnosis, and continually reassure your children that you love them. Invite their questions and answer them honestly.

How to tell your children about a cancer diagnosis:

- Plan what you’ll say and have a supportive adult there with you.
- You may want to tell older children first (if there’s wide difference in ages). Older kids may want to help you tell the younger ones.
- Pick a calm time and use a calm tone of voice. Tears are OK—yours and theirs.
- Target the conversation to the age of the child. Young kids have short attention spans.
- Tell them good doctors are doing everything they can to help the person with cancer, whether it’s you, your spouse, or a beloved grandparent.
- Ask if they have heard anything about cancer so you can counter misinformation if necessary.
- Bring up the topic frequently after the initial conversation.

Things kids need to know:

- They didn’t cause the cancer, and it isn’t their fault (even if they were mad at mom last week or once said, “I wish you were dead.”)
- Cancer isn’t contagious. You can’t get it, no matter how much you kiss or snuggle or hug.
- They can still feel happy about things like baseball season even if your mom or dad has cancer.
- It is normal to wish that things were different than they are.
- The doctors are doing their very best to make you better.
- There will always be someone there to take care of them.
- Whatever they are feeling is fine.

How to explain what cancer is

What you say about cancer will vary depending on the age of your children. With younger kids, don't get too technical. Tell them that cancer is something that grows inside the body and isn't supposed to be there. It is kind of like weeds in the garden. There are lots of ways to get rid of weeds (pulling, cutting, weed killer) and there are lots of ways to treat cancer (surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, pills).

Explain that sometimes you may be too tired to snuggle or play. This doesn't mean they're upset. It's normal and natural to feel disappointed if your parent or grandparent is too tired to play.

If you're going to lose your hair, tell the children before it happens. Explain that side effects like hair loss, fatigue, and nausea show that the treatment is working.

If your children ask if you're going to die, don't offer false reassurance. Instead, respond by saying, "I have great doctors who are doing everything that they can to make me well." If your cancer is advanced, say, "I have great doctors who are doing their best to treat it. I'll let you know how the treatment goes."

Tips for helping kids cope

- It's OK to bring kids to doctor visits if they'd like to go. It helps some children to see where you are going to get better. Explain what is happening to you. Consider giving younger kids a souvenir like tongue depressors or surgical gloves.
- If certain days—like chemo days—are worse than others, consider having a special basket of toys/goodies that only comes out on those days.
- Do your best to turn bad into good. It won't always work, but it's worth a try. For example, if you can't go to the beach to play in the sand, play with shaving cream in the bathtub instead.

What can kids do?

Letting your children help in some way builds trust and makes them feel like you're a team, working together to fight the cancer. Even though they can't fix the cancer, kids can make it easier for a loved one to cope with it. You can give children little jobs, like getting water for the patient, that make them feel helpful—but also reassure them that it isn't their job to take care of the patient. You might suggest that they:

- Draw pictures.
- Keep their room clean and do chores without too much fussing.
- Find quiet ways to play with the cancer patient – board games, cards, and coloring.
- Consider writing in a diary.

What can families do?

Regular family meetings are a good way to keep everyone informed about what is going on, answer questions, discuss schedule and chores, and build support. As a family you could also:

- Share a snack and do a craft together. Perhaps you could write in a family journal or play a board game.
- Pray together, if appropriate.
- Maintain hope: For getting better. For having a good day. For feeling less afraid.
- Make a Hope Tree. Make a tree-like tabletop structure or picture of a tree. Write a wish on a paper leaf and attach it to the tree. Keep adding wishes/leaves to the tree.
- Read about cancer. A good book is *The Hope Tree*, by Laura Numeroff and Wendy Harpham, MD, in which children talk about cancer.
- Even if you feel grumpy or tired, expend the extra energy to regularly reassure your children of your love for them.

The key to helping your children cope with a cancer diagnosis is to talk to them openly and honestly. Let them know they can always come to you for support or with questions—and that you love them enough to tell them the truth.

Resources:

- *How to Help Children through a Parent's Serious Illness*, by Kathleen McCue, MA, CCLS, and Ron Bonn, St. Martin's Press; New York, NY: 1994
- Children's Treehouse Foundation : www.childrenstreehousefdn.org
- Kids Konected : www.kidskonected.org

Dr. Chiamonte is a private Health Advocate and the founder of Insight Medical Consultants. She has been quoted by CNN, The Wall Street Journal and USA Today as an expert on patient advocacy.

www.InsightMedicalConsultants.com