

How to Tell Your Child You Have Cancer

Adult & Family Programs | Family Education & Support



A special note to parents and caregivers:

Being faced with a cancer diagnosis is already overwhelming, and now it's time to talk to your children or grandchildren about your diagnosis. You may instinctively want to protect them from what your cancer diagnosis means and how it will impact the family. However, children of all ages are very perceptive to changes in routine and how you interact with them. The most important thing to remember is that children are very resilient and can understand more than you may think they do. It's best for the truth to come from you, rather than hearing it from someone else. When talking to your children or grandchildren, give simple and honest explanations. You will be surprised how a short, simple explanation can provide comfort and relief.

STEP 1

PREPARE FOR CONVERSATION

Organize your thoughts and feelings before telling your children. It is best to tell them yourself, or if you are unable to, choose a close relative that the children trust. Be open, honest, and prepared to say out loud, "I have cancer."

When to tell: when you know all the facts about your diagnosis and have a treatment plan.

- Share this information soon after your cancer diagnosis.
- Focus all your attention on this important conversation.
- Allow enough time to answer questions.

STEP 2

CONVERSATION

Find a quiet time when your child isn't tired or distracted with other activities. Take a few deep breaths and know that telling your child, openly and directly, will help build trust between you and your child.

Possible Conversation Starters

“Do you have some time to talk about something important?”

“I’d like to share some important news with you.”

Be Prepared with Basic Facts

- The name of your cancer (e.g. Breast Cancer, Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma).
- The part of your body the cancer affects (e.g. stomach, bone, breast, blood).
- How the cancer will be treated (i.e. surgery, chemotherapy, and/or radiation).

Important Information to Share

- *“We don’t know why I got cancer.”*
- *“It is not contagious.”*
- *“It is not your fault.”*

How to Answer the Difficult Question, “Will You Die?”

“If I find out any new information or anything changes, you will be the first to know.”

“Right now there’s not a lot known about the kind of cancer I have. But, I’m going to give it my best and do everything I can to get better.”

Don’t Be Surprised

- Your school-age child may only respond briefly. Developmentally, younger children tend to cope more positively and show emotions later on in different ways.
- Your teen may not want to talk for a long time about your diagnosis. Validate their feelings, but let them know they can still ask questions.

“We can take more time later today or when you are ready.”

“I’m here. Let me know when you want more information.”

STEP 3

AFTER YOUR CONVERSATION

Continue to keep lines of communication open and offer opportunities to talk about thoughts and feelings.

- Put one-on-one time with each child on the calendar. Individual attention will allow more opportunities for questions and discussion.
- Ask ongoing questions to see what your child understands about your cancer and treatment plan.
- Include your child in clinic appointments so they can learn about how treatment affects you. This will help clarify misunderstandings that may occur.