



Talking About Cancer With Children of All Ages

Your child's age is an important factor in determining how to talk about your cancer diagnosis. When you tailor your conversation to what they're able to understand, you help create a safe and secure environment in which they can better handle the life changes that your diagnosis will bring.

Infants and Toddlers

Verbal communication may be limited here, but it's still important to establish a routine. Make sure trusted, familiar adults spend frequent time with the child to maintain as much consistency as possible. When you're away receiving treatment, stay connected with your child with video chat or a phone call. Make sure caregivers give your child plenty of hugs and attention, and assurance that you'll be returning soon.

Preschoolers

When telling a young child about your illness, be simple and direct, keeping details to a minimum. Attention spans at this age are short, so avoid long conversations. You can say that you're sick with something called cancer and that the doctors are helping you get better. A stuffed animal, doll, or drawing can help you show your child where the cancer is in your body. Reassure them that cancer is not contagious like a cold, and you can't pass it on to them. Give them a chance to ask questions and answer only what they ask.

Do your best to stick to your everyday routines, with the help of your spouse or a friend – it will help your child feel secure. Stay connected with your child through in-person hospital visits, or through video chat or a phone call. Learn more about how UT Southwestern's Patient and Family Resource Center can help with this. Consider arranging a consistent time each day when your child can ask questions and express emotions.

School-aged Children

Use simple, direct language to talk about your illness, taking care to explain what your child sees and hears. Younger children see the world from their own perspective and are focused on their own needs. It's common for them to ask, "Who will take care of me?" Let them know about the plans you've established and reassure them that their needs will be met. Older children may have more questions, and they'll likely be able to handle additional details about the cancer. If they've studied cells in school, you might explain that cancer cells don't act the same way normal cells do.

No matter the age, assure them that your illness is not their fault and they did nothing to cause it. Be prepared to answer additional questions they may have, even the tough ones such as, "Will you die?" However, take care not to overwhelm them with information. They need to digest the details at their own pace and return with questions later.

Teenagers

Teens are in the process of asserting their independence and establishing their identity. Still, they need support and reassurance from you. Be direct and transparent about your illness and prepare them for changes that will happen in the family. Share as much information as they seem ready to handle and reassure them that they did not cause your illness. Teens have likely heard a lot more about cancer than their younger siblings, so make sure they understand the details of your particular illness.

Be prepared for some reluctance to share their thoughts and feelings with you – the emotional response may come later. If your teen doesn't want to open up to you, he or she might get support from peers or other adults. Consider recommending a support group for teens who are dealing with a loved one's cancer diagnosis. Routine is important, so encourage your teen to maintain involvement in school and other activities.

More Information and Resources

Learn how Support Services at Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center can help children of all ages understand and cope with a loved one's cancer.