

PARENT HEALTH BULLETIN



JUNE 2025

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THIS MONTH'S TOPIC

TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT CANCER



Finding out that a loved one has cancer can be shocking. Trying to explain it to your child can feel overwhelming. It can seem easier or simpler not to say anything or to give them as little information as possible. However, talking with your child openly and honestly is vital to help them understand.

Every person and family may talk about difficult topics differently. Some basic ideas can help you frame and explain cancer to your child while still being mindful of their feelings and ability to understand.

- **Use plain language, reassure them that cancer is not contagious, and address their questions and feelings.** It's also helpful to discuss any visible physical changes and how the illness will affect their lives.

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It can be helpful to explain that cancer is a type of sickness that is not contagious, so they can't catch it.

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- **Choose the right time and place.** Pick a time when everyone is calm, and you can focus on the child. It can help to find a quiet and comfortable space where you can talk openly without others listening or kids being easily distracted.
- **Start with a simple explanation.** For young children, use simple terms. It can be helpful to explain that cancer is a type of sickness and identify the part(s) of the body it is affecting. Explain that cancer is not contagious, so they can't catch it. Then try to explain the ways this diagnosis might affect the person right now. For example, if the person is going to have treatment that may cause hair loss or limit the contact that they can have, it can be helpful to give the child time to process those changes. A simple explanation might sound like, "Aunt Maggie has a sickness called cancer in her lungs. Doctors are trying to help her get better, but the medicine she needs may make her hair fall out. Aunt Maggie might look different to you, but she still loves you very much! We may not see her very much for a while, because our germs could make her even sicker. But we can draw her pictures or call her on the phone."
- **Older children can understand more about cancer being a serious illness in which cells in the body aren't working correctly.** If the cancer is in an organ or place less familiar, it might be helpful to use a visual aid like a drawing or doll to show where it is located.
- **Encourage them to ask questions and share their feelings.** Listen to their concerns and explain that feeling scared, sad, or angry is OK. Let them know that they didn't cause cancer and that they cannot catch it. Answer questions honestly and openly, even if you don't have all the answers. Tell them that you'll be there for them and help them through this.
- **It can take time for children to process information.** They will likely come back to you later with questions or thoughts. Remember to be patient and understanding, and willing to



repeat information more than once. Children have developing attention spans. New concepts that can be overwhelming can make it difficult for them to take in lots of new information at once. Allow many conversations over time to give information about details or future possibilities.

By being honest, open, and supportive, you can help your child understand and cope with a cancer diagnosis. Consider seeking support from a child life specialist, social worker, or psychologist to help with processing the situation if needed.

REFERENCES:

- <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/caregivers/helping-children-when-a-family-member-has-cancer/dealing-with-treatment/intro.html>
- <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/caregivers/helping-children-when-a-family-member-has-cancer/dealing-with-treatment/talking-to-kids.html>

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