

Helping Kids Cope when a Loved One Has Cancer

When a parent or loved one has cancer, a common first worry is “How are my kids going to react?” As a parent, you are the expert when it comes to talking with your kids about cancer. The information here might help at this challenging time.

Why Kids Need to Know

Children are very quick to notice stress in the family.

Many times their imagined fears are worse than what is really happening. Studies show that children need accurate information that is right for their age when a parent or loved one has cancer.

When Kids Need to Know

Talk to your child as soon as you feel comfortable. Children often feel hurt if they learn about a loved one’s illness from someone else.

What Kids Need to Know

Children and teens need to know when someone in the family has cancer. Your child will want to know where the cancer is in the body. It is important to use the word “cancer,” because it is different from other illnesses.

- Make sure your child knows he or she did not cause the disease.
- Explain that you cannot “catch” cancer.
- Let your child know that many people survive cancer.

Kids can learn and grow from a loved one’s illness. This challenge may help everyone in your family be more sensitive and kind. Getting through this stressful time can also bring a feeling of pride and self-worth for kids and grown-ups.

Ways You Can Help

Here are some ways to help kids cope when a parent or loved one has cancer:

Talk to Them

- Encourage your kids to ask questions without pushing them to talk if they do not want to.
- Ask questions that need more than yes-or-no answers.

Here are some examples:

- What is the most confusing part of mom’s cancer?
- What do your friends say to you about my cancer?

- Encourage your child to express thoughts and feelings.
- Share your own thoughts and feelings with your child.

Give Them Helpful Information

- Let your child know what to expect along the way. This will help your child prepare for changes that can happen because of the illness or side effects of treatment, such as hair loss.
- Help your child name grown-ups he or she can go to for support or to talk.
- Make sure your children know who will take care of them if you need to stay in the hospital.
- Avoid making promises you are not sure you can keep.
- Do not worry your kids with details they cannot do anything about such as money problems.

Manage Their Time

- Make simple changes to help focus on each other:
 - Sit down to meals together
 - Limit visitors
 - Turn off phones
- When the person with cancer is not feeling well, plan play dates or fun activities with others.
- Do your best to keep a regular structure and routine.
- Give your child options about extra chores or ways to help around the house.

The social workers of Huntsman Cancer Institute’s Patient and Family Support team are a resource for information about talking to your children about cancer.

Available Monday-Friday from
8 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

Call 801-213-5699 or visit
huntsmancancer.org/pfs