

TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT CANCER

Elizabeth Wood, LCSW, ACSW

Chances are you know someone who has had cancer, but when your own family is affected, the word cancer takes on a new meaning – one that can feel personal and frightening. Cancer can be especially confusing to children who may be coping with a family member's diagnosis or their own.

What is Cancer?

The more you know about cancer, the less anxious and better prepared you'll be to talk about it with your child. Our bodies are composed of many types of cells, which grow and divide to produce more cells as needed to keep the body healthy. Cancer occurs when abnormal cells begin to divide without control and invade other tissues in the body. Different kinds of cancer have different signs, symptoms, treatments and outcomes depending on the type of cell involved and the degree of uncontrolled cell growth.

Coping with Childhood Cancer

Cancer affects about 14 of every 100,000 children in the United States each year. The most common childhood cancers are leukemia, lymphoma and brain tumors. A child diagnosed with cancer will have many feelings about the changes affecting his or her body, and should be encouraged to express any feelings, concerns or fears. Honest communication is a key component to helping a child adjust to a serious medical condition.

- As you explain your child's illness and its treatment, give clear and honest answers to all questions in a way your child can understand. It is important to inform your child that he or she is sick and will be getting lots of care.
- Parents can also prepare their child for any treatments – and possible discomfort that might go along with those treatments – by reminding them that the hospital and medicine may feel frightening, but they are helping to fight the cancer.

When a Friend or Relative has Cancer

Children can also have many different reactions when someone they love has been diagnosed with cancer. When talking to your child about a friend or family member's diagnosis, the goal is to prevent or alleviate fear and misunderstanding with open, honest communication.

- Provide your child with opportunities to express his or her feelings and reassure them their feelings are never wrong. It's also normal for your child's feelings to change frequently over time, so be available to discuss any questions or concerns your child may have. If you don't know the answer to his or her questions – don't panic. Tell your child you don't know the answers, but will ask someone for them.
- Prepare your children for the possible side effects of cancer. It may upset your child to see side effects such as hair loss, nausea, fatigue or weight loss. Explain these are common side effects of treatments that are helping their friend or relative fight their cancer.

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Many hospitals offer support groups and services for children dealing with their loved ones' cancer diagnoses. A social worker can facilitate discussions designed to help children talk about their feelings, while also giving your child an opportunity to meet other children with similar family situations.

September is Childhood Cancer Awareness Month. Families can make a difference in the fight against pediatric cancer by participating in local fundraising and awareness events held by organizations such as the Andrew McDonough B+ Foundation, Alex's Lemonade Stand, the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's Light the Night Walk, Kids Runway for Research, Kelly Heindz-Grundner Brain Tumor Foundation, or the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life in their local communities.

You can find out more about Childhood Cancer Awareness Month at www.curesearch.org and www.fightforthegoldde.org. For more information about cancer, please visit www.kidshealth.org.

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