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Helping Your Child Adjust to a Cancer Diagnosis

When children and teens are diagnosed with cancer, their whole world changes overnight. Instead of going to school, being with friends, and focusing on the tasks of growing up, they may have to suddenly cope with hospital stays, blood draws, tests, taking medicine, and having surgery or other treatments.

The first few weeks can be frightening and stressful for everyone in the family. Children and teenagers often respond to news of a cancer diagnosis with a range of emotions that reflect those of their parents. The child's age, stage of development, and personality also affect how they react.

- [Sharing cancer information with your child](#)
- [Understanding how children and teens react to a cancer diagnosis](#)
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Parents and trusted caregivers know their child in ways that the cancer team does not. The cancer care team has expertise treating cancer in children but you know your child. Your knowledge makes you an important part of the treatment team that will work together to help your child through the first few weeks after diagnosis. This section covers ways to give age-appropriate information about cancer and the reactions children and teens may have, ideas to help create routines and stay connected with life outside of cancer, as well as signs that more help is needed.

Sharing cancer information with your child

It may feel easier to try protect children and teens from cancer by not talking to them

about their diagnosis and treatment. Most children and teens figure out something important is happening when they do not feel well, are having tests, and they see adults

- what they know about cancer early on.
- Should be told the name of their cancer and how it will be treated.
- Will need information about what happens with school and other activities during treatment.
- Need to hear that they are not being punished for something they did wrong.
- May have questions and concerns about changes in appearance.
- Might ask if they are going to die. See *What If Your Child Asks If They Are Going to Die?*
- Find it helpful to read books about or talk with other children their age who have cancer (some hospitals have computer systems with information and digital games geared toward teaching children with cancer).
- Need to know that you will always try to tell them the truth and that it is good for them to ask questions or share feelings when they are sad, worried, or afraid.

Teenagers (12-18 years)

- Will usually be able to understand more complex information about their cancer, including treatment, procedures, and risks and benefits.
- Should hear diagnosis and treatment information directly from the health care team, as much as possible.
- Might find it helpful to connect with people their age who have cancer.
- Might have concerns about changes in appearance, including changes in weight and hair loss.
- Might ask if they are going to die. See *What If Your Child Asks If They Are Going to Die?*
- Usually want to know if they can still do things "normal" teens do such as parties, school activities, and hanging out with friends.
- Might have a good understanding of what cancer is in adults and need more information about what is different in children and teens.
- Should be offered the chance to participate in decisions about treatment and hear what is being recommended.
- Might benefit from talking with social workers and psychologists at the hospital or cancer clinic to talk about feelings without their primary caregivers being present.

Understanding how children and teens react to a cancer diagnosis

Children and teens react in many different ways to having cancer and starting treatment. There are some general things you may see in different ages that are all part of the normal process of adjusting to a serious illness. It is normal to experience stress after diagnosis but even normal reactions can be hard to manage without some help and advice from people who specialize in helping children with cancer adjust. Talk to the cancer care team about working with a psychologist or social worker. These specialists are often present in pediatric cancer centers and will meet with you and your family and help with any coping problems.

Infants and very young children with cancer might

- Fear being separated from parents
- Be afraid of and upset by painful medical procedures
- Withdraw, avoid interacting with others
- Cling to parents
- Not do things like walking, talking, or self-feeding on schedule for their age
- Need only a small number of cancer care team members to care for them to help with stranger anxiety

Toddlers and pre-schoolers with cancer might

- Yell, scream, throw tantrums, hit, or bite
- Regress to behaviors such as thumb sucking or bed wetting
- Be afraid of and upset by painful medical procedures
- Do well with consistent routines for medical procedures, such as blood draws, taking medicine, going to the hospital or clinic
- Might enjoy getting a sticker on a sticker chart for each activity
- Ask a lot of questions

School-age children with cancer might

- Be upset by disruption of school
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Teens with cancer might

- Be upset by the disruption of school and their activities with friends
- Be upset about changes in their appearance
- Feel their independence is threatened
- Show intense emotional responses
- Focus on the meaning of life and the cancer's effect on their identity
- Take risks that could cause problems
- Rebel against parents, doctors, and treatments

For more information about helping children cope after the first few weeks of treatment, including information about returning to school, see [When Your Child is Going Through Cancer Treatment](#)¹.

Finding a new normal

Children and teens will cope better if they see their loved ones managing stress and coping well. For more information about managing your own stress, see [If Your Child is Diagnosed With Cancer](#)². There are some important things you can do to help your child and teen adjust in the first few weeks. Here are some general strategies to help them adjust during the first few weeks after diagnosis and beyond:

- Ask for support with resources on the team that focus on helping with coping early on, such as Child Life Specialists, Psychologists, and Social Workers.
- Think about your parenting style and try not to change your expectations for their behavior because of cancer, it helps your child to keep things the same.
- Encourage your child or teen to talk about their feelings with you, another trusted caregiver, or member of the healthcare team.
- Encourage play time and activities to distract from painful procedures or during long hospital stays and clinic visits.
- Talk with your cancer team about ways to manage side effects of treatment, so your child feels as good as possible during treatment.
- Ask your cancer care team when your child can return to school and other activities. Even if they cannot participate, they may be able to watch activity practice or attend school part-time.
- Keep your school-aged child or teen connected with their friends.

talk with a psychologist or social worker at the cancer center who can evaluate the child and make sure that they get the kind of help they need. Rarely, a child may need to see a psychiatrist for medicine or counseling.

For more about survival statistics for your child's cancer type, see the [Cancer A-Z section](#)³ of this site.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/children-with-cancer/during-treatment.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/children-with-cancer/after-diagnosis.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer.html
4. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/?term=Last+BF%2C+van+Veldhuizen+AMH.+Information+about+diagnosis+and+prognosis+related+to+anxiety+and+depression+in+children+with+cancer+aged+8%E2%80%9316+years.+Eur+J+Cancer+1996%3B+32%3A290%E2%80%93294.

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