

Patient Education | Pediatrics

# Supporting Children: Talking about Cancer

Talking about cancer with children can be challenging. Conversations may happen in the hospital environment, at home or even in public. Regardless of where you are when it comes up, being open, honest and clear is important.

## Explaining cancer and treatment

Start by finding out what your child already knows. Many times, they know more than we think they do. You can ask questions to learn about what they already know and understand:

- › “Can you tell me what you know about cancer?”
- › “Have you heard the word ‘cancer’ before?”

After you set a baseline with the child, you can use the speaking bits below to help them understand more about cancer and cancer treatments.

### Defining cancer

- › “Our bodies are made up of millions of cells. We are always growing new healthy cells in our body. We have cells that help our brain, heart, other organs, skin, hair and even blood.”
- › “When the body has cancer, it is because of unhealthy cells in the body. These unhealthy cells can make us very sick because they grow and spread even faster than our healthy cells.”

## **Explaining a tumor**

- › “When these unhealthy cells grow, they can stick to each other and form a ball of cells that should not be in the body. We call this a tumor.”
- › “Some people call it a bump or a ball. No matter what we call it, it should not be in the body.”

## **Explaining surgery for treatment**

- › “Sometimes, the tumor is in a place where the doctors feel safe removing it from the body. In that case, a special team of doctors will remove the tumor.”
- › “Sometimes, they get the whole tumor. Other times, they cannot get the whole tumor. It depends on what the doctors feel is safest.”

## **Explaining chemotherapy**

- › “Even though cancer is a really strong disease, we can try to help fight the cancer cells with medicine called chemotherapy, or chemo.”
- › “Sometimes chemo can affect good cells (like our hair cells), too. When the chemo medicine is working, it can make a person sick, tired, frustrated, sad or even mad.”

## **Explaining radiation**

- › “Radiation is a special laser that fights a tumor. This laser is invisible and goes through the skin to help get rid of the tumor cells.”
- › “This laser is not bright, it does not feel like anything, and it does not hurt any other parts of the body. After radiation, the stomach may feel upset, the skin may feel sensitive and the person may feel tired.”

## How cancer changes the body

There will be body changes that the child can see and others they cannot see. Preparing them for these changes and helping them understand what is happening can make the experience less scary and easier to handle.

- › If chemotherapy is involved, let the child know **this can cause hair to fall out**.
  - “The medicine used to help fight the cancer can cause hair to fall out. The hair will grow back.”
- › If steroids are involved, there might be **weight gain and mood swings**. Let the child know that changes are happening because of medication.
  - “The medicine used to help can sometimes cause people to become grumpy or mad. It is important to know that it is not because of anything you did. It is because of the medicine.”
- › In general, cancer treatment can leave someone **feeling fatigued and sick to their stomach**. Help prepare the child for the days when the person is lacking energy or cannot participate in daily routines.
  - “When someone’s body is fighting cancer, they can feel very tired and sick. They might need extra rest and may not be able to do their usual things.”
  - “They might not be able to make meals, get groceries, drive or even play and have fun. It’s not because they do not want to: their body just does not feel well enough to.”

## How cancer changes routines

After a new diagnosis, life changes; and it will likely continue to change. There will be some changes that you cannot prepare for. However, you can let children know that things will be different and changes may happen unexpectedly.

Keep them updated on the events below. You might even use a calendar to keep track.

- › Planned hospital admissions
- › Treatment days
- › Changes in who will pick them up from school or take them to events
- › Changes in routines for dinner, bedtime, weekends and more



If a child is feeling frustrated, angry or sad with the changes or the unknown, validate these emotions. It can help to share your emotions, too.

- › “It seems like all of this change has left you feeling frustrated. I want you to know it’s OK to feel this way, and I am also feeling frustrated that so many things have changed.”

## Key reminders

Above all, make sure that children understand these 3 points. They are sometimes called the 3 C’s of cancer; they can promote understanding.

- › **Cancer** is the name of the disease.
- › It is not **contagious**.
- › It is not **caused** by anything someone did or did not do.

These points help give children knowledge (the name of the illness) and address common fears (reassuring them that other people cannot get cancer from someone and that having cancer is nobody’s fault).

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If you need support in talking about cancer to children, you can email a child life specialist at [NMHChildLife@nm.org](mailto:NMHChildLife@nm.org).