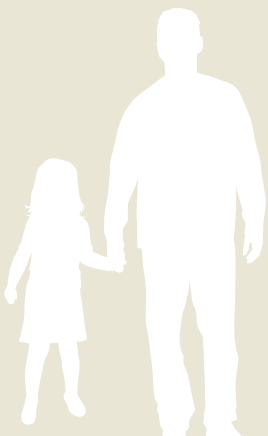




Talking to **CHILDREN**

Telling children about a loved one's diagnosis

Talking to children about the cancer diagnosis of someone they love can be intimidating. You may worry about what to say or what not to say. You may even wish to protect children by not telling them about the cancer diagnosis; however, children are very perceptive. Even young children may be able to tell that something is wrong. Children will use their imagination to fill in the gaps of information. Giving your children honest information from the start will lead to feelings of trust, control and involvement.



Make a plan to talk to children

Before talking to children, prepare what you will say in advance. If you are talking to your own children or to your loved one's children, make sure that you and your partner, or you and the person with cancer, are on the same page about what and how to tell the children. You may have to have multiple conversations with young children. Children need time to absorb information and can only take in so much new information at one time. You may want to provide basic information at first and then check in with the child later to answer questions and provide additional information.

If you have more than one child, be aware that your children may respond to a loved one's diagnosis in different ways. Some children may want to spend more time with the person. Others may need time to process the information. Allow for these individual differences. You may also want to check in with the child's teachers, coaches, babysitters or other adults who play a role in the child's life.

What you can do

- Talk to children in a comfortable space where you will not be interrupted.
- Remain calm when you are talking to children, but know that it is okay to show them how you feel.
- Try to anticipate questions and consider your answers. Answer questions as honestly as possible, keeping in mind age-appropriate details.
- Encourage the child to ask questions and to come to you with any questions or worries in the future.

Remember, you are not alone when it comes to talking to kids about cancer. Ask for input from members of the healthcare team, school counsellor or nurse, or other parents who have gone through a similar situation.

What to expect and what to say by age

Keep the discussion age appropriate when you talk to children about cancer. Consider the following guidelines.

Baby/toddler (0 to 3 years)




- Children this young do not have an understanding of illness or cancer. However, they are aware of changes to routines and the feelings of people around them.
- Children may feel separation anxiety and need physical and verbal reassurance.
- You may notice changes in appetite, sleeping patterns or tantrums in response to the changes in their environment.

Preschool/ kindergarten (4 to 6 years)



- Children in this age-group may have an understanding of illness but not understand the implications of a serious illness, such as cancer. It may be especially confusing to the child if the person diagnosed with cancer does not look or act sick.
- Reassure the child that no one did anything to cause the cancer, neither the child nor the person with cancer.
- As with younger children, a preschooler or kindergarten child may experience separation anxiety. Reassure the child and give advanced warning either if you or your loved one will be away.
- You may see signs of regression in a child's behavior, such as thumb-sucking, bed-wetting or tantrums.
- A child may use play to process the information, play-acting doctor/patient scenarios, for example.
- If the cancer treatment will result in any changes to the child's daily routine, explain it to him or her ahead of time so that the child knows what to expect. Inform the child's teacher so that he or she can also understand changes in routine.
- Explain, in advance, any physical changes that the child might notice about the cancer patient, such as hair loss, scars or unfamiliar medical equipment.

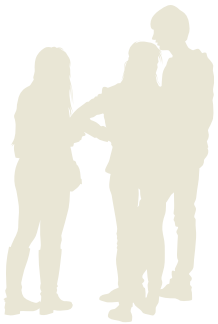


Elementary/ middle school (7 to 12 years)



- Children in this age-group may have a good understanding of serious illness, but not specifically cancer.
- The child may hear things about cancer from school, friends, on the TV or have found information on the internet. Ask the child what he or she already knows about cancer. If you encounter any misunderstandings, correct them using straightforward, clear statements such as “you can’t catch cancer from another person,” and “no one did anything wrong to cause the cancer diagnosis.”
- Explain that “cancer” is a broad term that covers many different types of cancer. It may be helpful to talk to the child about the specific diagnosis of his or her loved one.
- Younger children in this age-group may also show signs of regression or separation anxiety.
- If the cancer treatment will result in any changes to the child’s daily routine, explain the changes ahead of time so that the child knows what to expect.
- Explain, in advance, any physical and emotional changes that the child may notice in the loved one as a result of treatment.
- Children in this age-group can be very empathetic and caring. They may want to help their loved one.
- Suggest they write a letter or make a card for their loved one.
- Children may feel uncomfortable around a person they love who has a cancer diagnosis, or they may feel embarrassed when others outside the family know about the diagnosis.
- Children in this age-group may worry but hide their feelings. Try to check in with the child and keep an eye out for signs of depression, such as ongoing feelings of sadness, loss of interest in activities, trouble focusing, problems sleeping, angry outbursts or issues in school.
- Inform the child’s teacher or coaches of the diagnosis. Reach out to the child’s school counsellor or pediatrician for help if you notice troubling changes in mood or behaviour.

High school/ teenagers (13 to 18 years)



- Teenagers most likely have a good understanding of cancer, but you may still need to correct some misunderstandings heard at school, from friends, on TV, or information they found on the internet. It may be helpful to explain their loved one’s specific diagnosis instead of just using the word “cancer.”
- Having a loved one with cancer may lead teenagers to think more seriously about death and the meaning of life.
- Older teenagers may want to help with caregiving duties. Allow teens to help, as appropriate, but do not lay too much responsibility on their shoulders.
- Teenagers may show anger or frustration but not be willing to share their feelings as people in this age-group are often looking to gain a sense of independence.
- Teenagers may also act out or engage in risky behaviors, such as drinking, drug use, or sex.
- Watch for the signs of depression listed in the fact sheet **Your Mental Health**.
- Inform the teenager’s teachers and coaches of the diagnosis. Reach out to the school counsellor or the child’s pediatrician for help if you notice troubling changes in mood or behaviour. You may also want to tell the parents of the teenager’s close friends about the diagnosis.

These are only general guidelines. Your child may need further support to better understand the situation. Contact us to speak with a Community Services Manager in your area to learn about any local support programs that may be available for families.



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Never hesitate to contact us, we’re here to help!

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