



Talking to Children About Cancer

Children have a right to know the truth about what is happening in their family, especially when a parent has been diagnosed with a potentially life threatening illness. When this is not discussed, children will often imagine the worst as they attempt to come to their own understanding of what is happening. They might notice that Dad is sick a lot and wonder if they gave him this illness, for example. There will be many physical changes that the person who is sick will go through while receiving cancer treatment, and it is reassuring to children when these changes are explained in advance. We believe telling kids the truth at an age appropriate level is always best.

Primarily, it is important that you tell the children the truth about the cancer in words they can understand, while communicating they will be taken care of no matter what happens. Other ways to be helpful to the children:

- Allow them to ask questions and talk about the cancer
- Define some of the basic treatment language such as radiation, chemotherapy, etc.
- Assure them that whatever they are feeling about Daddy's illness is ok
- Explain how the family routine might be affected
- Debunk myths ("cancer is contagious", "all people die from cancer", "radiation makes one *radioactive*").
- Keep your children up to date with any significant changes in the cancer patient's treatment

Suggestions on what to say to your children and possible questions your children may ask:

"Your mom has been to the doctor a lot lately because she has breast cancer. This is a sickness that is in her breast and she is working with the doctors to find the medicines and other treatments that can hopefully make it go away".

1. "Are you going to die?"
This is a very serious disease and it is possible that I could die from it but the doctors are giving me very good treatment and we are doing everything we can to help me feel better.
2. "Can I catch this disease from you?"
No, you cannot catch it from me or anyone else, even if you drink or eat after me.
3. "What will happen to me if you die?"
Daddy will take care of you, you will stay in the same house, go to the same school, and have the same friends. Aunt __, Uncle ____, and Grandma/Grandpa will be around to help take care of you.
4. "Did I do something that caused your illness?"
No, there is nothing you wished for, prayed about or did that caused my illness.

**It's always a good idea to ask kids to tell you what they understand so you can correct any misunderstandings or misinformation.

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