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Parenting While Caring for a Parent With Cancer [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 07/2014



Listen to the [Cancer.Net Podcast: Parenting and Caring for Parents With Cancer](#)[3], adapted from this feature.

Key Messages:

- Simplifying your normal routine, creating an organizational system, and asking for help from friends and family will help you reduce your risk of burnout while you balance your children's needs and your parent's needs.
- Talking with your children about cancer, helping them express their feelings, maintaining a relatively predictable schedule, and ensuring you give your children some undivided attention each day will help create a safe environment for them during this challenging time.
- Talking with your parent about his or her needs and expectations and re-evaluating the caregiving arrangements at least once a month will help prevent misunderstandings and tension in your relationship.
- Give yourself permission to take care of your own needs so that you can continue to be an effective caregiver.

Tips to reduce risk of burnout

If you are parenting young children while caring for a parent with cancer, you know firsthand the practical and emotional challenges. Here are a few tips to help you juggle your responsibilities and reduce your risk of burnout:

Simplify. Make a list of your obligations and activities, dividing the tasks into those you must do and those that can wait. Prioritize the activities that are most meaningful to you and your children, eliminate the ones that you can, and delegate tasks such as laundry, cooking, and cleaning to others when possible. Ask your older children to help you choose which activities are important to them.

Organize. Create an organization system—whether it is paper-based or electronic—that works for you and enables other people to support you and your family. Items that you may need to track and store include important contact information; details about your parent's medical history, cancer diagnosis, and cancer treatment plan; notes taken during appointments; copies of health

insurance cards and legal documents; and financial information. In addition, consider using a calendar or a task list to record your parent's appointments and your immediate family's commitments. Find more [tips for organizing care](#) [4].

Ask for help. Don't be afraid to ask for assistance. Most friends and relatives are willing to help, particularly when given specific suggestions. Although you may feel uncomfortable or guilty because you cannot do it all, delegating tasks allows you to spend more quality time with your children, spouse, and parent. And it allows you to take time to care for yourself, which will ultimately benefit your family. You may want to assign a "captain of kindness," such as a close friend or family member, who will be the contact person for others who would like to be helpful. He or she can coordinate assistance that you need and serve as a buffer against unwelcome intrusions in your parenting or family time. Learn more about [sharing responsibilities](#) [5] and [other options for caregiving](#) [6].

Tips for caring for your children

Consider the following tips to create a safe, secure environment for your children while you care for your parent:

- Give your children age-appropriate explanations about your parent's illness, let them know that nothing they did caused the cancer, ask if they have heard anything about cancer that they don't understand, and encourage them to ask questions. Learn more about [how to talk with your children about cancer](#) [7] and [how children understand cancer at various ages](#) [8].
- Let your children know that it is normal for people with a family member who has cancer to be worried and sad sometimes. Encourage them to express their feelings in ways they find helpful, whether they want to talk with someone, write a story, draw a picture, or play with toys.
- Maintain a predictable schedule and routine as often as possible. Most children find comfort in structure. It also helps to make emergency back-up plans for childcare and tell your children about these plans in advance. For example, say, "Aunt Susan will stay with you at our house if I need to take care of Grandma," or "Mrs. Jones will pick you up from school when I take Grandpa to the doctor."
- Tell your children's daycare or school and their friends' parents about your parent's illness, providing updates when necessary. You may want to send a letter or an email so that adults who interact with your children will have consistent, accurate information. Many parents find it helpful to guide other adults in how to talk optimistically with their children.
- Enlist the help of neighborhood or school-based parent groups to help with carpooling, childcare, and keeping your children involved in after school activities.

It may help to remember that, although caring for a parent who has cancer while parenting young children is challenging, it is a unique opportunity to model for your children how families take care of one another and how to make sacrifices for the benefit of another person.

Tips for caring for your parent who has cancer

Talk with your parent about his or her needs and expectations upfront, and set up a time to re-evaluate how things are going at least once a month. If this is difficult for you to talk about, ask a health care professional, family member, or member of the clergy to guide the conversation. You

may also want to consider taking the following steps:

- Request a home safety evaluation conducted by a visiting nurse or occupational therapist. The provider will recommend devices and services to enhance your parent's safety and ability to function on their own.
- Find people to attend to your parent's physical needs or to provide help with basic household tasks, meals, or transportation while you are at work or caring for your children. If other family members or friends are not able address these needs, you may consider asking a social worker, nurse, or doctor for referrals to resources in your community.
- Make caregiving back-up plans for your parent so that someone can relieve you on short notice.
- Use technology to call, video chat, or email to stay in touch with your parent when you're not available in person.

Learn more about [how to manage common caregiving responsibilities](#) [9].

Tips for caring for yourself

Taking care of yourself physically and emotionally is essential to healthy caregiving. Try to incorporate some of the suggestions below:

- Use resources available through your employer, such as the Family and Medical Leave Act and Employee Assistance Program.
- Take advantage of local caregiver [support groups](#) [10], as well as [online communities for support](#) [11].
- Make a balanced diet, regular sleep, and exercise a priority.
- Plan periodic activities with family or friends that do not involve discussions or tasks related to your parent's cancer.
- Allow yourself some time, even in small intervals, to relax in the ways that work for you. This may involve hobbies, [writing in a journal](#) [12], or daily quiet time.
- Maintain your social support as much as possible, and create time for you and your spouse, partner, or friends to stay connected.

Learn more about [how to care for yourself while caregiving](#) [13].

More Information

[Caregiver Support](#) [14]

[Being a Caregiver](#) [15]

Additional Resources

[Family Caregiver Alliance: Caregiving Issues and Strategies](#) [16]

[National Cancer Institute: When Someone You Love is Being Treated for Cancer](#) [17]

Links:

- [1] <http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/caregiver-support/parenting-while-caring-parent-cancer>
- [2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>
- [3] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/Parenting_and_Caring_for_Parents_With_Cancer.mp3
- [4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25065>
- [5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25032>
- [6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25029>
- [7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25311>
- [8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25300>
- [9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25236>
- [10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25383>
- [11] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24634>
- [12] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31561>
- [13] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25031>
- [14] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25009>
- [15] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25233>
- [16] <http://caregiver.org/caregiving-issues-and-strategies>
- [17] <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/coping/when-someone-you-love-is-treated>