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Parenting While Living With Cancer [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 09/2013

Key Messages:

- A challenge of living with cancer is balancing your family's needs with your own.
- Asking for help from your spouse, partner, children, and other loved ones can provide much-needed support.
- Resources in your community, such as school guidance counselors, religious institutions, and non-profit organizations, also can help.
- Knowing you do not have the time or energy for everything and reevaluating your priorities will help you create realistic goals and expectations.

Being a parent while living with cancer is often physically and emotionally exhausting. You may wonder how you can continue to care for your family as well as take care of yourself while coping with a cancer diagnosis. This is the time to accept help from others and reconsider your schedule and to-do list. Asking for help when you need it allows you to spend less time worrying and more time enjoying your loved ones.

Get support from family and friends

If you have a spouse or partner, talk about how parenting responsibilities may need to shift during this time and express your appreciation for his or her support. Recognize that these added responsibilities can become overwhelming and may lead to feelings of frustration. It helps to talk openly about each other's limitations and brainstorm possible solutions. Learn more about [how to talk with your spouse or partner about cancer](#) [3].

Other family members, friends, and neighbors may also want to support you but may not know how. Make a list of specific tasks with which you need help. Tasks may include picking up your children from activities, arranging play dates for your children, walking the dog, grocery shopping, or making meals. When someone offers to help, choose a task from your list that suits the person. For example, ask a classmate's mother to drive your child to school each day.

Some people find it helpful to designate a friend or family member as the point person to coordinate requests, saving you time and energy that you can devote to your family. Additionally, some [online communities](#) [4] allow you to coordinate volunteer efforts through a shared calendar.

Seek community support

Your local community may offer resources to help you balance living with cancer and your family life.

- School guidance counselors can offer your children extra support, and after-school programs can provide them a safe place to be when you have a doctor's appointment or need time for yourself.
- If you belong to a place of worship, ask about their support programs. Many religious institutions provide financial, physical, or emotional assistance that can help you focus on parenting. Many provide support to non-members as well.
- Charitable organizations in your community may be able to provide everything from child care and transportation, to meals and financial assistance. [Oncology social workers](#) [5], case managers, and your doctor or oncology nurse can provide referrals. Or, use this list of [general cancer organizations](#) [6] to help you find what you need.

Ask your children for help

When a parent has cancer, children often feel powerless to change the circumstances. Asking your children to do chores around the house can help them feel like they are making a difference. On the other hand, having unrealistic expectations for help around the house can add to the stress your child or teen is already feeling about your cancer diagnosis.

The following are tips for asking your children to help with chores:

- Explain that you are going to need some extra help for a while and that everyone in the family will need to pitch in.
- Use a chart to help children and teens be more consistent in keeping up with their usual chores. This will keep your expectations clear by establishing what tasks need to be completed and by when.
- If you need additional help, consider adding one age-appropriate chore to the list. Offer younger children small, manageable chores that fit their abilities. Children will likely become frustrated and give up if the chores are too difficult.
- Work together to complete bigger tasks. To clean up after dinner, have one child clear the table, another load the dishwasher, and another put away the leftovers.
- Ask children to help each other. Teenagers and older children can help with car rides and homework. Younger children can help each other pick up toys or fold laundry.
- Build incentives into chores. For example, let your children pick their drink and dessert when they make their own school lunch.
- Make sure to let your child or teen know his or her help is appreciated. Say thank you and offer rewards for jobs well done. Rewards may include a family movie night, an ice cream

outing, or extra computer time.

Remember that you cannot expect your children to be expert cleaners or to do their chores as carefully as you might. Accepting their best efforts will help keep your children motivated.

Reevaluate your priorities

Most parents struggle to fit everything into their family's schedule, even without the demands of cancer and cancer treatment. It is important to accept that you do not have the time or energy for everything and to be realistic about what you can and cannot do.

Consider making a list of all that needs to be done, including household chores, childcare, and tasks related to your cancer treatment. Then decide which items are priorities for you and which items you can ask someone else to do or just leave undone. You may track the family's activities on a calendar that is displayed in a place where everyone can see it, and then talk about the plans together at the beginning of each week or the night before each new day.

To make more time for each person's priorities, consider the following:

- Take advantage of free and low-cost delivery services. For example, many grocery stores offer online shopping and home delivery. Other items that can be delivered to your home include prescriptions, household items, school supplies, and dry cleaning.
- Spend less time in the kitchen. If you enjoy cooking, try doubling recipes and freezing half to save for another meal. Or keep your meals simple; sandwiches or scrambled eggs can take the place of a more elaborate meal. In addition, take advantage of nutritious ready-to-eat and frozen foods available at many grocery stores.
- Do not try to clean the whole house. Concentrate on what matters most to you, such as having the dishes done or the toys off the floor. If possible, hire a cleaning service or a college student to do a more complete cleaning once or twice a month.
- Reconsider your family's schedule. If your children are involved in many activities, ask them to take a break from some and pick which activities they would like to continue. You may want to emphasize that it is better to do fewer activities consistently than to do too many with irregular attendance and preparation.
- Reconsider your own activities and focus on one or two that are important to you. Do not commit to any new activities until you know you have the time and energy for them.

In addition, many times a parent living with cancer feels like he or she has to pack more love and fun into every day because the future is uncertain. However, this puts a lot of unnecessary stress and pressure on both you and your family. These attempts to overfill time are often exhausting for everyone and may do the opposite of what you are trying to accomplish. Instead, think about choosing smaller, more manageable activities that will give you quality time with your family and do them in a relaxed way.

Care for yourself

With all the demands on your time, it can be easy to overlook your own needs. Taking care of yourself should be a priority or it may become difficult for you to take care of your family the way you would like. If you find yourself struggling with issues such as [fatigue](#) [7], [nausea](#) [8], [pain](#) [9],

or [depression](#) [10], talk with your doctor or nurse about ways to manage them. You may also want to ask an oncology social worker about ways to connect with others who are experiencing similar situations, either by joining a [support group](#) [11] or finding a [support buddy](#) [12].

In addition, try to find time to do something you enjoy, such as meeting with friends or seeing a movie. It is important to not feel guilty about taking time for yourself when the laundry is not finished or when someone wants a ride to a friend's house. Time spent resting and doing activities that you enjoy helps to replenish your energy, giving you the strength you need to invest in your family.

More Information

[Family Life](#) [13]

[How a Child Understands Cancer](#) [14]

[Talking With Your Children](#) [15]

[Talking With Your Teenager](#) [16]

[Supporting a Friend Who Has Cancer](#) [17]

[Grocery Shopping Made Easier](#) [18]

Additional Resource

[Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center: Parenting Principles](#) [19]

Links:

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/communicating-loved-ones/parenting-while-living-cancer>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25207>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24634>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24556>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/publications-and-resources/support-and-resource-links/general-cancer-organizations-and-resources/general-cancer-groups>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25048>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25052>

[9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24585>

[10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25480>

[11] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25383>

[12] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24526>

[13] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25299>

[14] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25300>

[15] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25311>

[16] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25313>

[17] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24691>

[18] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24550>

[19] <http://www.mghpact.org/parents.parenting.php>