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Cancer and School [1]

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



Listen to the [Cancer.Net Podcast: Just for Teens - Cancer and School \[3\]](#), adapted from this content.

Key Messages:

- After you are diagnosed with cancer, it's important for your parents to contact your school to let them know how often you will need to miss school and for how long.
- There are different ways to stay involved with your friends, classmates, and schoolwork. Go at your own pace when you can and when you are ready.
- You may also want to consider what, when, and how to tell your classmates about your cancer diagnosis, treatment, and recovery.

After you are diagnosed with cancer, one of your concerns may be how to handle both school and treatment. Depending on your treatment plan, you may be able to continue to attend school and keep up with schoolwork, with short breaks for appointments and treatment. Or, you may need to take more time off from school.

Talking with the school staff

Because you may need to take a long break from school, be absent more than usual, or find it hard to keep up with schoolwork, it's important for your parents to contact the school to discuss these concerns. Depending on the school, you may need to talk with the guidance counselor, principal, school nurse, and/or your teachers. Talk about some of the following topics before treatment begins and before returning to school after a long absence:

- Attendance, since you may need to miss days or classes for treatment and appointments
- Permission to wear a hat or scarf in school if treatment causes your hair to fall out and you prefer to keep your head covered
- Activities that you may not be able to participate in, such as gym class
- The possibility of having fewer classes

Some hospitals have educational coordinators or social workers who can meet with school staff to explain your situation and needs. If possible, ask your doctor to give you an estimate for how long and how often you may be away from school.

Staying involved

There may be times during treatment when you can't go to school on a regular basis. However, staying involved with school can help you feel like you're missing less and make it easier to return when you are ready. Here's how to stay involved:

- Keep in touch with your friends online, through texting, instant messaging, video chats, e-mail, phone calls, or visits.
- Ask a friend to take notes for you if you need to miss a class.
- Ask teachers if you can photocopy their notes, record their class, or reduce your homework load, if possible.
- Consider asking for a reduced class schedule if possible – maybe you can skip a gym class or an elective class and concentrate on core subjects such as math and English.
- Ask your teachers if they would be willing to e-mail you assignments or send work home with a sibling or friend.
- Consider getting a tutor or hospital teacher to help you with your work from home or the hospital.
- Try to arrange to attend school for special events that are important to you.

Remember that your health has to come first while you are receiving treatment for cancer and recovering. Side effects from your treatment, such as extreme tiredness, called fatigue, and feeling like you need to throw up, called nausea, may make it difficult to concentrate on schoolwork or to spend a lot of time with friends. Try not to feel embarrassed or upset if you need extra time to complete schoolwork or don't feel like being with your friends.

Interacting with your classmates

Your classmates will react to your cancer differently. How they react may depend on how much school you miss or if your appearance changes, such as if you temporarily lose your hair. Here are some tips that may help you talk with your classmates and prepare yourself for their reactions:

- Ask a parent or teacher to give the class some basic information about the cancer and treatment. Or, if you feel comfortable, ask your teachers to arrange a time for you to tell the class about the cancer.

- If you decide to tell your classmates yourself, decide what you're going to say; you may want a parent or the school counselor to be there to help answer questions. If you feel you are in control, you will be more comfortable and the conversation will flow more smoothly.
- If you decide to have someone else, such as a parent or a counselor do the talking, decide whether you want to be there and how much you want people to know.
- If you're going to be away from school for a long time, consider visiting for a couple of half-days or for a few hours before going back full-time. You can also ask a friend or two to meet you outside school on your first few days back, so you don't have to walk in alone.
- Be prepared to answer questions, but if someone asks you something you don't want to answer, it's fine to say, "I'd rather not talk about that."
- Be prepared for insensitive comments or questions, and try not to let them upset you.

Any information you feel comfortable giving can go a long way toward helping your classmates better understand your situation. Many people are just curious and simply want to help. Don't forget that you don't have to deal with any issues with your classmates by yourself. If you need help, talk with someone you trust, such as your parents, a teacher, or the school counselor.

Keeping up with schoolwork

It's natural to want to keep up with your usual school schedule or jump right back in after being away for a while, but going to school can be tiring during and after cancer. Take it easy at first and don't overdo things. Your health is the most important priority.

If you find that school is harder than it used to be or you have more difficulty keeping up with your schoolwork, ask for help. Some cancers and treatments can make it harder to concentrate, remember things, understand what you read, or write, which can make it difficult to keep up in class. Some of these problems may be temporary, but some may last longer.

Not everyone will have difficulties with learning during and after cancer treatment, but if you notice a difference in how you learn, there are things you can do. Talk openly with your parents and doctor about your worries. They can help you work with your teachers and guidance counselor to help you adjust to these changes. For example, teachers may let you take more time during tests, use a computer to take notes, or record classes.

More Information

[Cancer and Your Friends](#) [4]

[For Teens](#) [5]

Additional Resources

[Group Loop: School](#) [6]

[Teens Living with Cancer: School Issues](#) [7]

Links

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/teens/family-friends-and-school/cancer-and-school>

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

[3] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/just_for_teens_cancer_and_school.mp3

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25157>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25116>

[6] <http://www.grouploop.org/mm/got-cancer/school/default.aspx>

[7] <http://www.teenslivingwithcancer.org/i-can-deal-with-it/school-issues/>