Cancer and Your Parents

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [1], February / 2012

Key Messages:

- Although talking with your parents about your diagnosis may be difficult, it is important to keep an open line of communication.
- Your parents may be able to help you with various situations you may face, both in the hospital and at home.
- Asking for help does not mean that you have lost your independence; it allows your parents to support you during a challenging time, which can bring positive changes to your relationship and increase your respect for each other.

A cancer diagnosis affects everyone in your family, including your parents. How this relationship changes will vary depending on the closeness of your relationship, your family's coping style in a crisis, and whether you have othersâ€"such as a spouse or partner or close friendsâ€"in your life who provide support.

After receiving a cancer diagnosis, you may feel that your parents become overprotective or that they are trying to take charge, even if you haven't lived with them for many years. They may want to talk to you frequently, ask a lot of questions, or give unsolicited advice. It is natural for your parents to want to protect you and take care of you when you are sick because that was their primary role for many years. Your parents are also dealing with their own emotions surrounding your cancer diagnosis, as well as those of your siblings and other family members.

Talking with your parents

Although it may be difficult, try to talk openly with your parents about what you're feeling and thinking, and ask them to do the same. Some young adults don't want to share their worries and fears with their parents because they feel guilty about potentially upsetting them. However, sharing your emotions and being clear about what you need allows you and your parents to work together to resolve problems and support each other.

Given the opportunity, your parents may be among your best sources of emotional support, and you may find that your relationship with your parents changes in positive ways. Your parents may gain respect for you as an independent adult, and your relationship may become more open and supportive.

Even with the best support, though, you may find that one parent or your spouse or partner wants to manage the situation by becoming an expert on the disease and controlling the information between you and the medical team. In these situations, it is important to be clear about everyone's roles and needs. For young adults with a spouse or partner, it is important to find a balance between receiving help from your spouse and from your parents. Some people find it helpful to meet with a family therapist or counselor [2] to resolve these concerns.

How your parents can help you

As a young adult, you are trying to become independent and may not feel comfortable relying on your parents. Be honest about your need for independence as you make your own decisions, but don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it. Let your parents know whether you want practical help or just someone to listen to you. Your parents likely have more experience than you do in some situations, such as dealing with doctors and insurance companies. Take advantage of their expertise, and allow them to help you in practical ways, including the following:

- Gathering information, doing research, and taking notes at doctors' appointments
- Making sense of medical bills and insurance statements
- Organizing your finances and medical records
- Keeping you company on trips to the hospital
- Doing household tasks, such as shopping, meal preparation, or laundry
- Responding to questions and phone calls from friends and other family members

Living arrangement options

Although some young adults live at home with their parents, many live in their own home or apartment. If you do not have a spouse, partner, or close friend who can help you at home, there may be times during your treatment when living alone becomes difficult. Consider asking a parent or another close family member to move in temporarily to help you. Some young adults choose to move back into their parents' home for a while. Moving in with your parents or another family member may feel like you are giving up your independence or like you are unable to take care of yourself. However, by making that move, you are taking initiative to ensure that your physical, emotional, practical, and financial needs are met, and you are giving your family a role in your care.

More Information

Family Life [3]

Talking With Your Spouse or Partner [4]

Being Single With Cancer [5]

Cancer in Young Adults [6]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[2] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Cancer.Net+Feature+Articles/Quality+of+Life/The+Benefits+of+Counseling
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25299
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