

[Home](#) > [Coping With Cancer](#) > [Talking With Family and Friends](#) > [Talking About Cancer](#) > Talking With Your Children

PDF generated on July 24, 2016 from

<http://www.cancer.net/coping-with-cancer/talking-with-family-and-friends/talking-about-cancer/talking-with-your-children>

Talking With Your Children [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board \[2\]](#), 06/2015

If a family member has cancer, children often sense that something is wrong. Although it may be challenging, it is better to talk with children about cancer than ignore it. A child's parents or primary guardian should take the lead in discussing a family member's cancer diagnosis.

For parents and primary guardians

Children often overhear conversations. They tend to worry more if they feel that important news is being kept from them. As a parent or guardian, you may want to protect your children from distressing news, such as cancer. However, avoiding the topic may confuse children and make them fear a worst-case situation.

It is also important to remember that children share information with each other. The whole family, including your siblings and parents, should work together to decide what and how much to tell the children about a family member's cancer diagnosis. This can help avoid confusing or misleading information being passed among the children.

Tips for talking with your children

As you talk with your children, listen to their concerns and answer their questions to the best of your ability. Here are some tips to help talk with your children about cancer:

General tips for communication

- Use the term cancer. It gives your children specific information and reduces confusion and misunderstanding, particularly if they overhear you using the word with others.
- [Use age-appropriate language to discuss cancer](#) [3]. Younger children need a simpler explanation. A more detailed explanation helps reduce feelings of helplessness and fear for older children.
- Reassure them that they did not do anything to cause the cancer.
- Reassure them that cancer is not contagious.
- Let them know that it is okay for them to have many different feelings and that you have many of the same feelings, too.
- Let your children know that they are free to ask any question.
- Be honest when answering questions. It is okay to say, "I don't know."
- Offer a realistic but hopeful assessment of the situation, and focus on the steps to treat the cancer.
- Try to keep your children's routines as consistent as possible, but prepare them for the things that will change.
- Provide opportunities for your children to help. However, don't burden them with more responsibility than they can handle.
- Be prepared to discuss death with your children. Use clear, specific terms, and avoid euphemisms such as "passing away" or "sleeping forever." Children may confuse sleep with death and fear that they may die in their sleep or think that a person could wake up from death.
- Consider practicing the conversation with a trusted loved one who can give you feedback

on your tone and choice of words. You will want to be as calm as possible while talking to children about a cancer diagnosis.

Treatment-related tips

- Talk about the types of treatment and the timeline of treatment, if known.
- Explain that, although the treatment may have some difficult side effects, it is ultimately working to help the person with cancer get better.
- Prepare your children for possible physical changes, such as hair or weight loss, before they happen.
- If you are in the hospital for an extended time, your children may think that you don't want to be at home with them. Staying in touch will help reassure them that the illness does not affect how much you love them.

Tips for continuing the conversation after the diagnosis

- Consider meeting with a counselor. This person can help you appropriately address a child's unique needs and stage of development when talking about cancer.
- Ask your doctor or nurse about the resources available at your treatment center and in your local community.

For grandparents and other family members

It is important that parents or primary guardians take the lead in discussing a family member's cancer diagnosis. If you are diagnosed with cancer, you may want have follow-up discussions with your grandchildren or nieces or nephews.

Here are some important things to consider before having any discussion with your grandchildren or your nieces or nephews.

- Ask your adult children or siblings how much they have already discussed with their children.

- Ask if it is okay for you to have a follow-up discussion with grandchildren or nieces or nephews.
- Encourage your whole family to talk with each other, so there is no confusion among the children in the family.
- Consider sharing the above tips with your adult children or siblings.

More Information

[Talking About Cancer](#) [4]

[Family Life](#) [5]

[Parenting While Living With Cancer](#) [6]

[Parenting While Caring for a Parent With Cancer](#) [7]

[Counseling](#) [8]

Additional Resources

[CancerCare: Children](#) [9]

[KIDSCOPE](#) [10]

Links

- [1] <http://www.cancer.net/coping-with-cancer/talking-with-family-and-friends/talking-about-cancer/talking-with-your-children>
- [2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>
- [3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25300>
- [4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25302>
- [5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25299>
- [6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24640>
- [7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24639>
- [8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24699>
- [9] <http://www.cancercare.org/tagged/children>
- [10] <http://www.kidscope.org/>