

Talking With Your Teenager

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Talking with your teenagers about your cancer diagnosis may be intimidating. It is important to know that adolescents respond differently than younger children or adults. They may need more information or more time to sort through all of their feelings. In addition, although adolescents may want more independence, they will still look to you for support and reassurance.

Tips for talking with your teenagers

Gently share the truth about your diagnosis. Teenagers often benefit from being told the facts about your cancer diagnosis and treatment plan. Ignoring or hiding the truth from teenagers may undermine their trust in you. In addition, ask your teenagers what questions they have and address any [misconceptions](#) [1] or concerns they may have. For example, reassure them that they did not cause the cancer, as some teenagers may have feelings of guilt. They may also need reassurance about their own health because they could worry that cancer may be contagious. Your discussion may also prompt questions about their own personal health, which they may wish to address with a health care provider.

Communicate information in small doses. Ask your teenagers if they understand the information that you have shared. Look for signs that they have learned enough for one day. You may need to share information in multiple conversations because it may take them time to process all of the feelings that arise.

Encourage your teenagers to ask questions. Adolescents need permission to ask questions. They may worry about you, wonder about the side effects of your treatment, or want to know when you will feel better. You should try to answer all questions gently yet honestly. Some teenagers may seek information on their own through the Internet or another source. You or your doctor can help them understand whether the information is relevant to your diagnosis and correct any inaccuracies or misconceptions.

Talk about anticipated changes in the family routine. Your teenagers are probably wondering how their daily lives will be affected. Try to keep from altering their routines as much as possible, but acknowledge that some things may be different. For example, let them know if a neighbor will be picking them up from soccer practice.

Specify what you need from your teenagers. You may base this decision on their age and maturity level. While asking for help with age-appropriate tasks, avoid giving them too much responsibility. Sometimes teenagers may try to take on an unrealistic amount of responsibilities to help their parents, which may lead to increased stress.

Ask about their feelings. Try to ask specific questions such as, "What is it like for you when I'm gone on Tuesdays for treatment?" Short questions such as, "How are you?" may get short responses such as, "Fine." Encourage them to share both positive and negative feelings. In addition to asking direct questions, some teenagers may feel more comfortable expressing themselves through art and writing.

Consider professional counseling. Watch for changes in your teens' behavior that may indicate that they could benefit from additional support to help them cope:

- Changes in academic performance or a loss of interest in school
- Withdrawal from friends or over involvement with friends
- Mood changes, such as being extremely worried or sad all the time
- Drug or alcohol use

Learn more about [the benefits of counseling](#) [2].

In addition to counseling, teenagers may have additional sources of support to help them process the circumstances. Remember that teenagers are trying to establish independence from their parents. If they aren't communicating much with you about how they are coping, they may be seeking support from friends or other adults, such as grandparents or coaches. They may also feel more comfortable joining [a support group](#) [3] than talking with a counselor.

Remember that [humor](#) [4] and hugs go a long way. Laughter is always good medicine, and it may be a good release of stress for both you and your teenagers. They may also appreciate hugs, kisses, and reassurance, even if they act embarrassed about it. A strong support system within and surrounding your family often helps everyone involved manage with the challenges that come with a cancer diagnosis.

More Information

[Talking About Cancer](#) [5]

[Family Life](#) [6]

[Parenting While Living With Cancer](#) [7]

Additional Resources

[CancerCare: Children](#) [8]

[KIDSCOPE](#) [9]

Links:

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24460>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24699>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/patient/Publications+and+Resources/Support+and+Resource+Links/General+Cancer+Organizations+and+Resources/Support+Groups>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24807>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25302>

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

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24640>

[8] <http://www.cancercare.org/tagged/children>

[9] <http://www.kidscope.org/>