

Explaining cancer to children and teenagers

This information is an extract from the booklet *Talking to children and teenagers when an adult has cancer*. You may find the full booklet helpful. We can send you a free copy – see page 3.

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Introduction

Children need some information about the name of the cancer, where it is in the body and how it'll be treated.

Here are some examples of how you can explain cancer to young children:

- 'I have a lump growing inside my body (explain which part) that shouldn't be there. It's called cancer and I'm going to have an operation to take it away. After that, the doctor will give me medicine so that the lump doesn't come back.'
- 'I have an illness called cancer. The doctor is giving me medicine to help me get better. The medicine might make me feel sick or tired some days, but other days I'll feel fine.'
- If your child asks you what cancer is – 'Our bodies are made up of lots of tiny things called cells. They all have a different job to make our bodies work and keep us healthy. Cancer is when some cells in the body stop working properly and stop the healthy cells doing their jobs. The cancer cells can grow into a lump.'

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Teenagers in particular may look for information about cancer on the internet. You or your doctor could help them understand whether the information they find is accurate and relevant to your diagnosis. They may find it helpful to visit the Macmillan website (macmillan.org.uk), Hope Support Services (hopesupportservices.org.uk) or Riprap (riprap.org.uk) – a website for teenagers who have a parent with cancer. We can send you a list of other sources of support online.

Important points to get across

Children, particularly those under 10 years old, often worry about things like causing the cancer or catching it. All children need reassurance that:

- nothing they did or thought caused the cancer
- cancer isn't like a cold and you can't catch it – it's okay to sit close, hug or kiss
- there will always be someone to take care of them
- they can always ask you questions and talk to you about how they feel
- you'll listen to their worries and try to help them cope.

'I made the decision to be honest and open with my children. I always promised I'd tell them the truth. It made it open for them to ask me anything that was worrying them – and they have.'

Louise

More information and support

More than one in three of us will get cancer. For most of us it will be the toughest fight we ever face. And the feelings of isolation and loneliness that so many people experience make it even harder. But you don't have to go through it alone. The Macmillan team is with you every step of the way.

To order a copy of *Talking to children and teenagers when an adult has cancer*, visit be.macmillan.org.uk or call 0808 808 00 00.

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