



How to Tell Your Children You Have Cancer

This resource was adapted from a blog post about how to discuss a parent's cancer diagnosis with children.

To read the full blog post, visit nbcf.org/how-to-tell

There is simply no easy way to say "I have cancer" to a child, but it's important to prepare them for what's to come. It's helpful to start with an age-appropriate version of the truth. Here are ideas to help you approach this difficult conversation.

Be honest while keeping it simple

Some kids may want a lot of details, while others may need to pause and come back to the conversation later. Either way, start with what they need to know and follow their lead.

Begin by explaining:

- The type of cancer you have
- The expected course of treatment and how long it might last
- What physical or emotional changes they may notice in you
- How their daily lives or routines might be impacted

Let them know you're in this together

It's okay to express your own emotions, including sadness or uncertainty, while reassuring your kids that you are still a strong team. This gives kids permission to experience the range of emotions they are likely to feel as well.

Give space for questions

Always try to answer your children's questions about your diagnosis and treatment as honestly as possible for their age and development. Sometimes the answer to a question may be "I don't know." In these cases, be sure to follow up with your child when you find the answer. This lets them know that you are doing your best to be honest with them.

What to say when telling your kids you have cancer

These example phrases can be altered based on the age and developmental level of your child:

- "I have some important news to share with you. The doctor found a lump in my breast that is made of cancer cells. It's different from a cold or flu. I might feel worse from the strong medicines before I get better. I will update you as I have more information."
- "I need to take a special kind of medicine called chemotherapy. Its job is to get rid of the cancer cells. But it's such a strong medicine that it sometimes causes side effects like feeling tired or maybe even losing my hair. They will get better when I'm all done with the medicine, but it takes time."
- "During my treatment, some things will be the same and some things will be different. For example, you'll still go to school, but I might need help getting you ready for school."
- "Even if I look different or don't feel great, I still love you and I'm still here for you."

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