

Talking to your children

This section discusses the difficult task of deciding what to tell your children about your cancer diagnosis, its treatment, and the fears and uncertainties you may be facing. Women diagnosed with cancer often find this one of the hardest problems they have to face, as they try to balance their children's need to understand what is happening in the family, with a natural wish to protect them. As a mother, you will have your own ideas about what to tell your children. Every family is unique, and you alone know your children's needs and emotional maturity. Our purpose is to offer information to help you make an informed decision about how you will go about this difficult task.

Why Tell?

- Even very young children will be able to sense when you are upset
- If others know, there is always the chance that they will overhear a remark and be confused and scared
- It is better to hear about it from you than from someone else
- If you tell them, and reassure them that you will keep them informed, they will be less likely to become overanxious, searching for clues as to how ill you are
- If they are not told, children can feel isolated, left out and unimportant
- Children may feel that something they did or said has made you sick - you need to reassure them that they did not give you cancer
- They may hear things about cancer from TV or school that are scary and be too afraid to talk to you about it unless you have already spoken to them.

When trying to find the right words, remember these two basic needs of children:

1. A truthful explanation of what is going on, appropriate to their level of understanding
2. Reassurance that their needs for love, physical safety and stability will be met.

Younger children

How your children might react:

- Your child may become very sad, and teary. This is understandable. Other reactions may be more confusing
- Some children in distress regress to past behaviours (for example: bed-wetting, thumb sucking)
- Some children will feel sorry for themselves because they have to take on more responsibilities
- Some will be jealous of the attention their mother is getting, then feel guilty because they 'should' be feeling sorry for her
- Some children will try to make up for guilty feelings by being especially good and setting impossibly high standards for themselves
- Others will become irritable and disobedient
- Some children will cling to their mother, afraid that something will happen if they are not there
- Some children will withdraw from their mother, unconsciously trying to become more independent in case she is going to die
- Some children will laugh and behave inappropriately to cover up their real feelings
- Some children will pretend to be ill to get attention, or to avoid being away from their mother
- Some children will be afraid that they will get cancer too.

These are all understandable reactions. As upsetting as they may be, these behaviours usually pass with time. Let your children know that you understand and accept them as they are.

The following tips and guidelines will help

- Reassure children that cancer is not catching
- Reassure them that nothing they did or said caused your cancer
- Give reassurance that their needs for love, comfort, physical safety and stability will be met
- Answer their questions simply and honestly
- Acknowledge that there will be times when they want to talk about your cancer, and other times when they want to take 'time out' and act as if everything is normal
- Give frequent updates, even if your children don't ask regularly
- Do things together. Watch television together, help with their homework or read them a story
- Keep to usual routines as much as possible. The more 'normal' things appear, the less they will be worried

- If your children have after school activities, get someone to help with transporting them to and from these
- Younger children may become very 'clingy' and not want to leave you. They may want to sleep in bed with you and miss school. While young children will need lots of reassurance, they can sometimes begin to think that things must be really, really bad if they are allowed to do things they were not allowed to do before.

Seeking further help

Sometimes it can be helpful for a child to have extra support. Often a trusted friend or family member can help to answer questions and give your child extra attention. There are times, however, when support from someone outside of the family circle is helpful. Children can find their emotions confusing. They may feel scared, angry, guilty, overburdened or left out. They also may be trying very hard to protect your feelings. If you think your child may need extra support, there are a number of resources available.

- Many schools have special teachers or counsellors that you, or your child can arrange to see
- Contact your own Cancer Treatment Centre and ask for their advice
- Contact your local Community Health Centre; many now have oncology nurse consultants who can let you know of services in your community
- Contact the NSW Cancer Council

The Anti-Cancer Foundation in Adelaide has a booklet for children called "What about me". Written in cartoon form, this booklet provides basic factual information about cancer and its treatment, and explores the possible feelings, fears and concerns your children may have. It is designed for them to either read alone, or with you. It can be a useful starting point to explore their issues, and to start answering some of their questions. You or your child can call them for a copy on 1800-188-070. It is also available on-line – <http://www.cancersa.org.au>

Teenagers and older children

Adolescence can be a difficult time for both teenagers and parents. Adolescents' emotions are often complicated, unpredictable and

troublesome. When a mother is diagnosed with cancer, and the teenager's behaviour is proving a challenge, it can be really hard to know whether the teenager is acting out because of their mother's illness, or their behaviour is just 'normal' for their age.

Two questions will help:

Was she/he behaving like this before the diagnosis?

Do other parents (who do not have cancer) have teenagers who are a challenge?

Many of the tips and guidelines for younger children are important for older children too.

1. Give answers that are truthful yet hopeful
2. Reassure your children that nothing they did or thought caused your cancer, that it's not contagious, and that they will continue to be loved and cared for no matter what happens to you
3. Enable your children to carry on as normally as possible, and let them know that it's OK to do so
4. Reassure them that it is 'normal' to feel angry. Many older children resent having to do more around the house. They also resent having to worry about a parent. This does not make them 'bad'. It is normal for teenagers and young adults to be preoccupied with their own worlds, sometimes to the exclusion of everything and everyone else
5. Reassure them that talking about their feelings and worries is a positive way of coping. If they are finding it hard to talk to you, encourage them to talk to someone close who can support them, such as a relative or family friend
6. As far as possible, keep to the rules that you had before your illness. Most children try to 'bend the rules', but generally rules and boundaries help to give children a sense of stability
7. If you ask them to take on more responsibilities, make sure you let them know that you notice and appreciate their help
8. Teenagers may feel they can't express their angry feelings at home and start 'acting out' at school. Let their teachers know what is happening
9. Some children will not want you to tell others. This is often so that they can maintain a 'cancer free' life outside of the home. This

strategy can be helpful, as it gives them 'time out'. However, it can also mean that your child has no one to talk to about your diagnosis. You will need to discuss with your child the advantages and disadvantages of this choice.

For many of the same reasons as younger children, older children, even adult children, may need extra support to deal with their emotions. Many teenagers and adult children have found counselling to be helpful when dealing with cancer in the family. Your treatment team can help them access professional support.

The National Breast Cancer Centre of Australia has developed a useful website for teenagers called 'my parents cancer'. It particularly aims to help teenagers understand their emotional reactions to their mother's diagnosis. Although developed for children of women diagnosed with breast cancer, it may be helpful to your teenagers. <http://www.myparentscancer.com.au/>).