



# **When Someone in Your Family Has Cancer**

**National Institutes of Health  
National Cancer Institute**

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## Introduction

When someone in your family has cancer, things can change for everyone. These changes can be large or small. What it is like to have a parent or a brother or sister with cancer depends on a lot of things such as:



- Who in your family has cancer.
- What kind of cancer the person has and how it's treated.
- How old you are.
- If you have other people in your family or close friends nearby who can help.
- Whether you live with two parents or with one.
- If you have brothers and sisters at home and how old they are.
- How far the person with cancer goes for treatment-across town or to another city or state-and if you can visit or call them.
- How long the person has to stay in the hospital.
- How well or sick the person with cancer feels.
- Whether you can get the answers to your questions about cancer.
- How easy it is for your family or friends to talk with you about cancer.
- How easy it is for you to talk about cancer.
- Whether your friends know what is happening to your family.
- How your friends treat you.

Any of these can make a difference, and only you know how cancer has changed your life. No booklet can answer all your questions. This one was written to help you understand more about cancer and how it is treated. It may help you to understand the changes that may happen in your life. It also may help you understand and deal with feelings you have about cancer and about the person in your family who has it.

## Cancer and the Family

Any illness changes family life for a while. A parent or a brother or sister who is home sick with the flu can't spend as much time with the family as usual. The sick person may get special attention, and you may need to help around the house. But most times, the person is not sick for very long, and family life soon goes back to normal.

But when someone has cancer, it is different. He or she needs special medical treatment and may go to the hospital or clinic a lot. People in the family may worry. They worry for the person who has cancer and for themselves. Cancer is a serious illness, and it can be scary if you don't know for sure if the person will get well or not.

People in your family may react differently. They may be afraid or angry that their life has changed. They may be tired, or they may be nervous about the future. They may be tense and not as easy to talk to as before, because they are worried. Some people may go on just as if nothing has happened, and they may not seem different at all. If you are upset, you may wonder if they care about the family

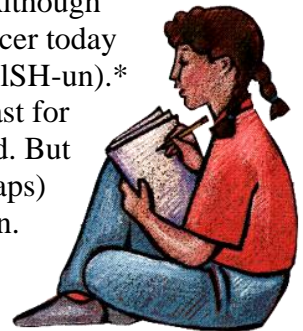
member who has cancer. It's important to remember that each person reacts in his or her own way. You may get mad at other members of your family for the way they are acting. It is better to talk with them than to stay mad. If you talk, you can understand why they are acting that way.

### Some Things You Should Know

- More people are living with cancer now than ever before, and new ways to treat cancer are being discovered.
- Having cancer doesn't necessarily mean a person will die from it.
- Nothing you did or didn't do caused your family member to get cancer.
- Nothing you thought or said caused your family member to get cancer.
- Cancer is not contagious-you can't catch it from someone else or give it to anyone else.
- You or your parents could not have protected your brother or sister from getting cancer.
- If someone in your family has cancer, that doesn't mean that you or anyone else in your family also will get it.
- Nobody can tell you why your parent or brother or sister is sick, and you're healthy.
- The way you behave cannot change the fact that someone has cancer or that your family is upset.
- It is good for you to continue with school and outside activities.

### Cancer: Can It Be Cured?

Some people think that because a person has cancer he or she is going to die. Although some people do die from cancer, many do not. More people are living with cancer today than ever before. In many cases, cancer treatment can cause a remission (ree MISH-un).\* Remission means that there are no more signs of the cancer. A remission can last for months or years and sometimes lasts so long that the person is considered cured. But sometimes the cancer comes back. If this happens, it is called a relapse (REE-laps) or recurrence (re-KUR-unce). When that happens, treatment usually starts again.



Whether the person in your family can be cured of cancer depends on many things, and no booklet can tell you exactly what to expect. If you wonder how your parent or brother or sister is doing, ask an adult who you think will know. Ask someone in your family or someone who works with people who have cancer. If your parents agree, you may want to talk to the doctor, nurse, or social worker at the hospital where your family member goes for treatment. Nobody can tell you what will happen in the future, but they can help you understand what is happening.

It may help to know that a lot of cancer research is being done, and ways of treating cancer are getting better.

\* Groups of letters surrounded by ( ) are here to help you pronounce words that might be new to you.

## One Way To Help Yourself: Learn About Cancer

Learning about the type of cancer the person in your family has and the treatment being used will help you understand what is happening to your family member. Both of these are important to know about because there are more than 100 different types of cancer, and the treatment for each type is different. Also, there may be more than one way of treating a type of cancer, so people who have the same kind of cancer may not even get the same treatment. Treatment will depend on how old the patient is, whether the cancer has spread to other places in the body, and what the doctors think is best for each patient.

Treatment will usually follow a protocol (PRO-to-kol), which is a plan for treating cancer. However, even if two people have the same type of cancer and the same treatment, the treatment may not work the same way for both of them. So, if you know or hear of someone who has had the same type of cancer and treatment as your family member, and that person did not do well, it doesn't mean that your family member isn't going to get well. It is important to remember that each person is different and can react to treatment differently.

### Words Used When Talking About Cancer

**Benign** (be-NINE): Not cancer.

**Biopsy** (BY-op-see): A test where a piece of tissue (a group of cells) is taken from a person's body and looked at through a microscope to see if the cells are normal. This is one way to see if a person has cancer. A biopsy also can tell what type of cancer a person has.

**Cancer** (KAN-ser): Over 100 diseases where cells that are not normal grow and divide rapidly. They crowd out and destroy normal cells the body needs. Cancer can also spread to other parts of the body.

**Diagnosis** (dy-ag-NO-sis): Identifying a disease. A diagnosis is based on tests and doctors' experience and knowledge.

**Hematology** (hee-ma-TOL-o jee): The study of the blood, the parts of the body where blood is formed, and blood diseases.

**Immune cells:** Cells in the body that protect a person from infection and disease.

**Lump:** A thickness or bump under the skin that can be felt by the fingers, either by the person who has it or by a doctor. Lumps can be a sign of cancer, but most lumps are not cancerous.

**Lymphatic system** (lim-FAT-ik): Certain tissues and organs of the body that make and store cells that fight infection and disease (immune cells). These cells are carried throughout the body in an almost colorless fluid called lymph (limf). Lymph and the vessels that carry lymph fluid also are part of this system.

**Malignant** (ma-LIG-nant): Cancer.

**Metastasis** (ma-TAS-ta-sis): The spread of cancer from one part of the body to another. Metastasis also is the word used for a new tumor caused by the spread of cancer cells.

**Oncology** (on-KOL-o jee): The study and treatment of cancer.

**Prognosis** (prog-NO-sis): What might happen to a person who has a disease.

**Recurrence** (re-KUR-unce): The return of cancer cells and signs of cancer after a remission.

**Relapse** (REE-laps): Recurrence.

**Remission** (ree-MISH-un): The disappearance of cancer symptoms and cells. When this happens, the disease is said to be "in remission."

**Tissue** (TISH-u): A group of cells that performs a specific function.

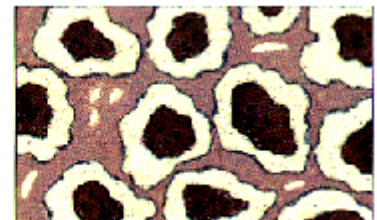
**Tumor** (TOO-mur): An abnormal mass of tissue.

## What Is Cancer?

Cancer is a group of more than 100 diseases. Each type of cancer has its own name (such as lung cancer, breast cancer, leukemia), its own treatment, and its own chances of being cured. Each type of cancer is different from the others in many ways, but every cancer is the same in this way: Certain cells become abnormal and grow without control.



Normal cells



Cancer cells

The millions of tiny cells that make up the human body are so small that they can be seen only by looking through a microscope. Although there are different kinds of cells, such as hair cells, skin cells, and blood cells, each type of cell makes new cells by dividing into two. This is how worn out, old cells are replaced with new ones.

What happens when someone has cancer is that a cell changes and doesn't do the job it should do for the body. When a cancer cell divides, it makes more cells like itself—cells that are not normal. These cells keep dividing into more cells. Eventually, they crowd out and destroy the normal, healthy cells and tissues the body needs.

A group of cells that keeps growing and crowding out normal cells is called a tumor (TOO-mur). There are two kinds of tumors. A benign (bee-NINE) tumor is not cancer. The cells of a benign tumor can crowd out healthy cells, but they cannot spread to other parts of the body. A malignant (ma-LIG-nant) tumor is cancer. Like a benign tumor, it can crowd out healthy cells around it. Unlike a benign tumor, however, a malignant tumor also can spread to other parts of the body. To do this, a cell or group of cells breaks away and moves, usually through the blood or lymphatic system, to other parts of the

body. There they divide and grow and form tumors made up of cancer cells like the cells they came from. When this happens, it is called metastasis (me-TAS-ta-sis).

## Cancer: It's Not Contagious

Scientists know that you can't "catch" cancer from someone who has it. It does not spread like chicken pox or the flu. You can't catch it from being with a person who has cancer or by drinking from the same glass as that person. You may know that you can't "catch" cancer, but you may wonder if having someone in your family who has cancer means that you also are going to get cancer. Instead of worrying, it is best to talk with your parents and the doctor about this. They can tell you that cancer usually doesn't run in families, and you can talk about what scares you.

## Cancer Treatment

There are four main kinds of treatment for cancer-surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and biological therapy. These are used to destroy cancer cells and bring about a remission. Depending on what type of cancer people have, they could have one kind of treatment or a combination of treatments.

Treatments for cancer sometimes cause unwanted side effects such as hair loss, nausea, and weakness. Side effects are problems caused by the treatment. This happens because cancer treatment that destroys cancer cells also can hurt some normal cells.

Sometimes, people with cancer are treated in studies that test different types of cancer treatment. You may hear someone in your family talk about "clinical trials"; these are carefully designed studies that test new and promising treatments.

## Words Used When Talking About Cancer Treatment

**Biological therapy:** Treatment to improve the ability of immune cells to fight infection and disease.

**Chemotherapy** ( Kee-mo- THER -a-pee): Treatment with anticancer drugs.

**Clinical trials:** Research studies that involve patients.

**Intravenous** (in-tra-VEE-nus): Into the vein. Also called IV. A common way of getting medicines into the bloodstream is by having them drip down from a container through a tube and needle and into a vein. Medicine also can be injected into the vein through a syringe (veins are tubes that carry blood back to the heart from all parts of a person's body). After surgery, blood or fluids to help a patient recover can be given through IVs.

**Protocol** (PRO-to-kol): A detailed plan that doctors follow when treating cancer patients.



**Radiation therapy** (ray-dee-AY-shun THER-a-pee): Treatment of cancer with high-energy rays to kill or damage cancer cells. This treatment can come from a machine or from materials put in or near the cancer. Radiation therapy does not make the patient radioactive.

**Side effects:** Problems caused when cancer treatment affects healthy cells in the body. The most common side effects are hair loss, being tired, and having nausea, vomiting, and mouth sores.

**Surgery** (SUR-ja-ree): An operation. Cancer surgery is done to remove cancerous tissue from the body.

**Vein** (vayne): Tubes that carry blood back to the heart from all parts of the body.

## **Surgery**

Surgery (SUR-ja-ree) is an operation. In cancer surgery, all or part of the tumor may be cut out. Sometimes healthy tissue around the tumor also is taken out. When people have surgery, they often have to stay in the hospital until they are strong enough to come home. When they do come home, they may still be weak from the surgery. There may be some things they should not do for a while, like lifting heavy things or climbing stairs, because the body needs time to heal after surgery.

## **Chemotherapy**

Chemotherapy (keemo-THER-a-pee) is the treatment of cancer with drugs that destroy cancer cells. These drugs go into the blood stream and are carried to cancer cells anywhere in the body. Chemotherapy is usually given many times for several months or years.

Chemotherapy is most often taken through a needle inserted into a vein, called an intravenous (in-tra-VEE-nus) or IV for short, or into a muscle (a shot), or by mouth (liquid or pills). Many different drugs are used in chemotherapy. Doctors decide which drug or groups of drugs to use depending on what type of cancer the person has.

## **Side Effects of Chemotherapy**

Chemotherapy works mainly on the cancer cells. But healthy cells, especially those that also divide quickly, can be harmed as well. This can cause unwanted side effects, and almost all people taking chemotherapy will have side effects. Most side effects don't last long and will gradually go away after treatment is stopped. The doctor can tell your parents (or the person with cancer) which side effects are most likely.

When chemotherapy acts on normal cells in the stomach and the rest of the digestive tract, from the mouth on down, it can cause nausea and vomiting. Sometimes people lose their appetite. If they have sores on the tongue, gums, or inside the cheeks, it is hard to eat, especially if the food is too hot, cold, or spicy. People often lose some weight because of these side effects.

Nausea and vomiting usually stop within 1 or 2 days after the drug is taken. Mouth sores may last longer and may not even start until 1 or 2 weeks after taking certain drugs. Many people with mouth sores use special mouth rinses to ease the pain.



Temporary hair loss is another common side effect of chemotherapy. Sometimes the hair falls out all at once, and other times it slowly thins out. There's no way to know whether all the hair will come out or if some parts of the body will lose more hair than others. Even if hair is lost, it usually grows back after treatment has stopped. Some people wear a wig, cap, or scarf until their hair grows back.

The bone marrow, the innermost part of the bone, makes new blood cells. If chemotherapy affects the bone marrow, it cannot produce as many blood cells as usual. For a while, the person may have fewer red blood cells, white blood cells, or platelets (PLAYT-lets), which are different kinds of cells in the blood.

Red blood cells carry needed oxygen to the tissues. When red blood cells are low, the person may be tired, pale, or cranky.

White blood cells fight infection. When they are low, the person is more likely to get sick and may need to stay out of crowded places or away from people who have something they could catch-like a cold, the flu, or chicken pox. Because of this, you may need to stay away from them if you get sick. Tell your parents when you have been around anyone who is sick, including anyone who has a cold, so they can watch for signs that you might be getting sick.

Platelets help stop bleeding. People who don't have enough platelets may bruise or bleed easily. They may have to stay away from rough play. If they get a nosebleed while their platelets are low, don't panic. They may bleed a little more than someone else would, but it will stop.

You may notice changes in how the person who is getting chemotherapy acts sometimes. Everyone has ups and downs, but these may be more extreme in people taking some kinds of chemotherapy. They may feel depressed, nervous, very hungry, or not hungry at all. Of course, every change like this is not due to chemotherapy. The person with cancer may be sad or worried.

The side effects people have depend on the drugs they take. They may have some or none of the side effects mentioned here, or they may have others. Young people who have had a parent or brother or sister with cancer have found that it is best to find out what to expect by talking to their parents or the person with cancer.

Side effects of chemotherapy are not pleasant, but they don't last forever. The drugs do not destroy all of the normal cells. Once chemotherapy is over, the hair usually grows back, and the bone marrow produces the normal amount of new blood cells. People with cancer begin to feel and act like themselves again.

## **Radiation Therapy**

In radiation therapy (ray-dee-AY-shun THER-a-pee), high-energy rays from radioactive substances are aimed at a malignant tumor. This damages the cancer cells. They die because they can not divide. Some normal cells close to the tumor also will be damaged. But most healthy cells are protected by special lead shields that cover the parts of the body not being treated.

To be sure the radiation is aimed right at the cancer, dye or felt-tip markers are used to mark the target area on the skin. These marks are needed until treatments are finished.

If you've ever had an x-ray, you know something about what radiation therapy is like and that it does not hurt. Radiation treatments for cancer take only a few minutes and often are given over a period of several weeks.

In some cases, radiation is not beamed through a machine but instead comes from radioactive material placed in or near the tumor. Surgery is used to insert radiation implants in the tumor. Then cancer cells will be destroyed from inside the body.

The person who gets radiation therapy is not radioactive during or after radiation therapy. When people have an implant in place, however, you will not be allowed to get too close to them until it is removed. They will be in the hospital during this short period of time.

### **Side Effects of Radiation Therapy**

Although radiation therapy is not painful, it can cause unwanted side effects. The person may be more tired than usual. The skin where radiation is aimed may feel like it has been sunburned and will need to be protected from the sun. Hair may fall out but only in the area receiving radiation. If the radiation therapy aims at the stomach, the person may have nausea or vomiting, diarrhea, or a loss of appetite. People who have radiation treatments to the head or neck may have a sore throat, headaches, difficulty swallowing, loss of appetite, loss of taste, or a changed sense of smell.



### **Biological Therapy**

The body's natural defense system is known as the immune system. Biological therapy uses substances to try to improve the ability of immune cells to fight infection and disease, including cancer. Some of the words you may hear when the doctor, nurse, or your family talks about biological therapy are interleukin (in-ter-LOO-kin), interferon (in-terFEAR-on), growth factors, or colony-stimulating factors.

### **Side Effects of Biological Therapy**

Biological therapy may cause a person to have nausea, diarrhea, loss of appetite, chills, fever, and/or a rash. During treatment, the person may feel weak or tired. These side effects go away when the treatment stops.

### **Side Effects: What You Can Do To Help**

There's nothing you can do to prevent side effects from cancer treatment, but you can help make them a little easier. Just understanding that side effects can make your parent or brother or sister feel tired or sick may help you be more patient. And if the person with cancer is tired or sick but wants company,

you can spend time with them doing quiet things such as talking, reading, watching TV, or playing games.

## Doctors Who Work With Cancer Patients

**Hematologist** (hee-ma-tol-o jist): A doctor who is a specialist in the study and treatment of blood diseases.

**Oncologist** (on-KOL-o jist): A doctor who is a specialist in treating people with cancer.

**Pathologist** (pa-THOL-o jist): A doctor who is a specialist in the study of cells and tissues removed from the body as well as in making a diagnosis based on changes in these cells.



**Radiation oncologist** (ray-dee-AY-shun): A doctor who is a specialist in using radiation to treat cancer.

**Radiologist** (ray-dee-OL-o jist): A doctor who is a specialist in making and explaining pictures of areas inside the body. These pictures are made with x-rays, sound waves, or other types of energy.

**Surgeon** (SUR jun): A doctor who is a specialist in doing operations.

## Learning More on Your Own

Now you know something about cancer in general, how it is treated, and about side effects from treatment. You may want to know more about your family member's cancer-like what kind it is, its treatment, and what that means for all of you. If you want to know more, ask someone who can answer questions such as:

- What kind of cancer is it?
- Where is the cancer?
- Will my family member get better?
- What is the best kind of treatment for this type of cancer? Will more than one kind of treatment be used?
- How do people feel when they receive this treatment? Does the treatment hurt?
- How often is this treatment given? How long will the treatment last?
- Does the treatment change how people look, feel, or act? If so, how?
- How long do treatments last-a morning, a week? Can I visit?
- Where are treatments given? What is it like? Can I come along?
- What will happen to me during these treatments?
- Can people receiving this treatment go back to school or work right away? Is it better for them to stay at home?

- Can my family member eat the same foods as everyone else? If not, what special foods or diets are needed?
- What can I do to help?

You may have questions of your own. Use the next page to write them down, so you won't forget to ask. You also can use this space to write down the answers to any of your questions or the ones listed here. Sometimes people who have a parent or brother or sister with cancer can visit the cancer treatment center instead of just imagining what it's like. You can see the building and equipment and meet the people who work there. Sometimes, You can meet other cancer patients.

If the hospital is too far away or has rules against your visiting, you could ask other people who have gone to the hospital to tell you what it's like. They can tell you about the people they know such as the doctors, nurses, social workers, and patients, and describe a typical day. They can bring home booklets, draw you pictures, and take photographs. This way they can share their experiences with you, and you can learn a little about the hospital.

## Reading About Cancer

Reading about cancer also may be useful. If you decide to read about cancer, be sure that what you read is up-to-date. Cancer treatment is getting better so fast that information may be out of date in a few years.

And remember, just as you're an individual, so is the person in your family who has cancer. Your family's experiences may not be exactly like those you read about. If you read something or see something on TV or in the movies, do not assume that what happens to the cancer patient in the story will happen to the person in your family.



If you read something or see something on TV or in the movies that you don't understand or you want to talk about, you may want to share it with your parents or another adult you trust. Pick someone who knows you and what you are experiencing. Give them the book or article to read or tell them about what you saw. Sometimes, when you are worried, it is hard to concentrate on what you have seen or read. It may help to talk it over and share how you feel.

## Cancer in the Family: What It's Like for You

When someone in your family has cancer, it may mean many things to you. Other people who have been through it say it can be a lot of things: confusing, scary, lonely, and much more. You may find that you have feelings that are hard to understand and sometimes hard to share.

This section tells about the experiences of others who have had a family member with cancer. Some of what you read, especially about feelings, may not make sense or seem right to you. It may even seem silly. Or it may seem a lot like what you've felt and what has happened to you.

Remember, feelings aren't "good" or "bad." They are just feelings and are normal and shared by many others. And even if you try to wish them away or ignore them, or if you feel guilty or ashamed of them, they'll still be there.

A good way to handle feelings is to admit you have them and talk about them. Talk with your parents, other adults, or your friends. Or you can talk with others who have had a family member with cancer. You'll be surprised how much better you feel once you have talked about your feelings.

## **People To Help You, Besides Your Parents**

### **For Support and Sharing Feelings:**

- Grandparents, aunts, uncles
- Neighbors
- Teachers, guidance counselors
- Ministers, rabbis, priests
- Coaches, youth or scout leaders
- Special adult friends
- Older brother or sister
- Friends your own age



### **For Support and Information About Cancer:**

- Someone at the hospital—a doctor, nurse, social worker, or other person treating your family member
- Family doctor
- School nurse

## **It May Be Hard To Talk About Cancer**

Sometimes it's not easy to talk about what you feel or about problems. Not only is it hard to say what you feel, but other people may not be ready or able to listen or to be helpful. Some of your questions may upset your parents because they don't know how to answer or because your worries remind them of their own. It's possible that your parents may not be ready to talk when you are. They may need more time to sort things out in their own minds before they can talk with you. Some parents, no matter how much they love their children, don't know how to talk about upsetting things with them. If your parents aren't able to talk with you about your feelings, they may be able to help you find someone you can talk to, like someone at the hospital, a relative or friend, or a teacher or school counselor.

Here is what some others who have had a parent or brother or sister with cancer have said about what they felt.

## Being Scared

**"I really didn't understand much at first. Mostly I was afraid that she might die, because my sister and I are pretty close. I was really scared, and I also thought it might be catching or something." – Laura, age 13**

The girl who said this had a sister with cancer, but it can be just as scary when a parent has cancer. When someone is first diagnosed with cancer, it may seem as though your whole world has fallen apart. You may not know much about it, so you may remember what you've heard about cancer before. Being afraid someone might die from cancer is normal, especially if the only people with cancer that you have known have died. And being afraid that you or another person in the family might catch it is normal, too. Why? Because there are so many things you can catch from someone else such as a cold or the flu. It's easy to think cancer may be the same, but doctors and other scientists know that you cannot catch cancer from anyone. Learning about cancer can help you. You will feel less afraid when you know more about the disease.



Hearing about treatments and tests can be hard. Some people find it's scary just to think about the needles and blood tests and radiation treatments. Sometimes, learning about these things and talking to the person with cancer (or someone else) about what it's really like is the best way to deal with these fears. If a trip to the hospital is possible, it might help.

**"One day I went to the clinic with my brother for his treatment. I saw the machine that he gets radiation from and how IVs work, and I met his doctor and the nurses. I saw lots of other kids who didn't have any more hair than he does. Now, when he goes to the clinic, I don't have to wonder what he's going through. I know what it's like. It's no fun for a little kid like him, but it's not as bad as I thought." – Matthew, age 14**

Sometimes, when one parent has cancer, the other one spends a lot of time at the hospital and away from the rest of the family. Having their parents at the hospital instead of at home can be scary to some young people. They may worry about their parents and need to have someone special to call to make sure that things are all right.

**"When dad's in the hospital, mom goes too, and I stay with my aunt, Emily. She's nice, but sometimes, I get scared because I don't know how dad is, or I miss them. So now mom and dad call me every night before dinner, and they tell me what's happening, and I can tell them about my day, and I know they're all right." – Erin, age 9**

## Feeling Guilty

**"I got really mad at Chrissy one day. She wouldn't let me go bike riding with her and my cousin, and I got mad and said 'I wish you were dead.' Now she has leukemia, and she could die, and I think maybe it's my fault. I was scared to tell anyone because then they'd all know what I did and be mad. But my dad heard me crying one night, and he got me to tell him why. He says it isn't my fault or anybody else's that Chrissy has cancer, and you can't make somebody get cancer just by what you say." – Katy, age 10**



Until you understand what does and doesn't cause cancer, it's easy to think that anything could have done it—even words or a fall.

**"I left my junk all over the floor one night instead of putting it away, and the next morning, mom fell over it. She was mad and had a lot of bruises. A little later, the doctor told her she had cancer. She's in the hospital now. Maybe if she hadn't fallen down because of me, she'd be okay."**  
– Tom, age 11

Just as words can't cause cancer, neither can bruises or bumps or even broken bones. Never forget: It was nothing you did, said, or thought that caused the cancer.

Some people are afraid to tell any one what they are thinking and may feel guilty for a long time. Even if your parents can see that something is worrying you, they may not be able to guess what it is. It's hard to talk about, especially if you think you've done something wrong, and everyone will be mad at you. But it is best to get it out in the open so you and your parents or someone at the hospital can talk it over.

People sometimes feel guilty because they are well, and their parent or sibling is sick. Young people may feel that it's not right for them to enjoy things they like to do when the person with cancer can't do what he or she likes. These feelings show that you care about your family, but it's important to care not only for the person with cancer but also for yourself. It's best for everyone if you keep being you and doing things that are important to you.

**"Last year, mom and dad always drove me to play softball, but now dad's sick and mom's always at the hospital or busy at work or at home. I didn't think I'd be able to play this year, and I wasn't sure I should, with my dad so sick. I told my grandmom, and she said I should play, and she'd take me. She likes to come, and she tells my folks all about the game and how I played. Next year, maybe, they'll all be able to come."** – Dave, age 11

## Getting Mad

**"Sometimes, I feel mad at my brother for having cancer. I know that's not right, and he can't help it. But it has changed everything. My mom and dad don't talk about anything but him and neither does anyone else. It's just not fair."** – Sharon, age 13

People who have a brother or sister or a parent with cancer can feel angry at that person for getting sick and changing their lives. This may seem wrong, and people sometimes feel guilty about getting mad. But, if having someone with cancer in your family means you can't be with your parents as much or have to stay somewhere else or give up things you like, it can be hard. Even if you understand why it's happening, you don't have to like it. Others who have been through it say it's important to remember that things won't always be this way. And when you get mad, remember that it doesn't mean you are a bad person or don't love the person with cancer. It just means you're mad.



## Feeling Neglected

One of the things that young people get mad about is feeling left out or neglected. Some feel that they don't get as much attention as before, and they often are right. Family members, including your parents, all have a lot on their minds, and they may have to put all their energy into helping the person with cancer. This may not leave much time for you, especially if they are going back and forth to the clinic or hospital.

Young people often feel that the brother or sister with cancer gets more attention from their parents.

**"At night my parents go in and turn on my sister's light and kiss her good night, and they don't come in my room-well, sometimes mom will. She tells me, 'Don't think we are partial to her.' "** – Maria, age 15

Young people may feel that their sibling with cancer gets away with a lot of things that they can't do.

**"If I do something wrong, mom yells. If my brother does, she lets it pass."** – Dennis, age 13

Why do some parents do this? It's not because they don't love all their children. This is a confusing time for them, just as it is for you. They have to learn a lot about cancer and hospitals very fast. They are tired and worried. They see one of their children sick and may try to make up for it by giving that child a little more attention. Parents know, as you do, that some people die from cancer, and they could be afraid of that and want to do all they can for your brother or sister who has cancer. Sometimes they give a young person with cancer special treatment that isn't wanted.

**"I have a sister who has cancer. She gets upset because she's treated differently now. She doesn't want to be babied, just treated normally as she was before. She and mom always used to fight, and now mom is really sweet all the time, and it's weird. Not that my sister likes to fight, but it's just not normal."** – Peggy, age 15

For whatever reason, and whether your brother or sister likes it or not, your parents may give special treatment to the one who has cancer. At times like this, it's normal to feel jealous, even if people tell you that you shouldn't because you're not sick. But it's natural for you to want time with your parents and some special attention, too.

Young people who have a parent with cancer also may feel neglected.

**"Now that mom's sick, everything at our house is different. We hardly ever eat together as a family anymore, and there's never anyone to help me with my homework or to listen to me. Mom used to do that. I feel like it's sort of being left up to me to take care of myself."** – Martha, age 13

When one parent has cancer, the other one may be so busy that neither one of them can spend much time with the rest of the family.



**"Sometimes, my father feels like he is neglecting us because he is with mom so much. And, in a way, it's true. I know he can't help it. He has to work and wants to see mom, but he's not around**



**like he used to be, and he doesn't do things with us like he did. He's just too busy."** – Barry, age 16

If you feel like you're not getting much attention, whether you have a parent or a brother or sister with cancer, remember that the person with cancer is getting more attention because they need special care not because you are loved less.

## Feeling Lonely

You may be lucky and have a special friend and friends who treat you the same as before your family member was diagnosed with cancer. But many young people with cancer in their families have found that they've lost some of their friends. Sometimes this happens because friends may not know much about cancer and may be afraid of catching it from you. Or they may not know what to say and find it easier to stay away than to be embarrassed. Having cancer in your family may make you act a little different because you're upset or scared or embarrassed or because you want to be with your family.

**"Sometimes, my friends wonder why I act strange. I wish they understood that, sometimes, I don't want to do what they're doing, I really want to be with my sick sister."** – Nan, age 12

If your friends don't understand, they may think that you don't want to see them anymore. It can be a hard time for all of you.

What can you do? You may need to reach out to your friends, even if that's hard to do. Maybe everyone won't respond as you'd like, but it helps if you give them a chance. Often friends just don't know how to act and need you to tell them how you want to be treated. They also may need you to show that you still need them, even if you seem a little different because you're upset. You may want to invite them over to watch TV, play video games, or just to talk. Let them know that you still enjoy talking with them on the phone or going to the movies- just as you did before.

If this is a hard time for you, remember that it won't last forever. Old friends may become close to you again. And people who have lost friends have found that they also made new ones. There may be someone at school who has had a sick person in the family and will understand how you feel. That person could be a special new friend.

## Answering Questions

When your friends do talk to you, some of them may not say what you want to hear. Sometimes, especially in the beginning, people ask a lot of questions that are hard to answer.

**"People asked me questions all the time. They'd say things like 'I heard Jean is in a coma' or 'I heard you were hysterical.' Whenever I told them the truth, they didn't believe me. And they'd ask dumb questions like 'Can Jean walk? Can she write?' They didn't know what was going on, and I didn't know how to answer them. I got sick of it."** – John, age 14



One way to answer your classmates' questions is for you and your parents to talk to your teacher and see if the teacher or someone who knows about cancer and its treatment can talk to your class. Ask the doctor, nurse, or social worker about a school conference or classroom presentation. This will give your friends a chance to ask their questions and be sure they're getting the right answers-not about your family member but about cancer in general.

Other people ask questions, and they may not know that some of them are hard for you to answer or make you feel bad. If you want to answer their questions, it's a good idea to think of what people might ask and have an answer ready. People may ask you how the person with cancer is feeling or how long the person will be in the hospital. And they also may ask questions like these:

"Are you going to get cancer from your mother?"

"Why does your brother always wear that cap? Did his hair really fall out?"

"Is your dad going to die?"

"What did your sister do to get cancer?"

You may want to get help finding answers to questions like these. There may be several people to ask such as your parents, teacher, or school counselor, an adult friend, or the doctor, nurse, or social worker. And remember, you always can tell people that you don't want to talk about something or that you don't know. You don't have to answer their questions. Sometimes, though, trying to answer a few questions and talking about your feelings can help others understand what you are experiencing.

## Feeling Embarrassed

**"Since my brother lost his hair and got so pale and thin, I don't want to bring my friends home anymore. I don't want them to see how different Tim looks now, and I don't think he likes to see them. Besides, it's not easy to laugh and giggle at home when someone is sick." – Caroline, age 12**

Sometimes people who have a person with cancer in their family may feel embarrassed because now their family is different. It is different from what it used to be, and it is different from their friends' families. And people who ask them questions they can't answer just embarrass them more. So sometimes they want to try to leave the cancer at home and hope that none of their friends learn about it. Of course, you can't really do that because when someone you love is sick, you need people you can talk to and who understand if you're upset. If you feel a little embarrassed around people because someone in your family has cancer, remember that others have felt this way also and that this feeling often goes away once everyone has gotten used to what is happening.

Even though others feel all right about asking a lot of questions, some people with a family member who has cancer find that it embarrasses them to ask questions. Just remember: No question is a dumb question if you don't understand it.

**"At first I didn't ask any questions, although I had a lot of them. I thought people would think I was really dumb, but now I know it really helps to ask." – Brad, age 14**

## Dealing With Side Effects

**"Diane had all this hair, and some nights it would fall out and be all over her pillow when she woke up, or fall out in her comb, or when she washed her hair. It really kind of scared me to see that happen at first, but she took it pretty well." – Lois, age 16**

When someone you love has side effects from cancer treatments, you too have to learn to live with these changes. It may seem a little strange at first, or scary, but other people have found that they soon got used to it. Some people outside the family may not understand, and they may hurt the feelings of the person with cancer.

**"When my little brother, James, went back to school, he was still on chemo and had lost all his hair, so he wore a baseball cap. One day a kid pulled the cap off and teased him. James said everybody stared at him. Mom says we should feel sorry for that kid because he doesn't know any better. But I don't, I feel sorry for James." – Amy, age 12**

It's hard to imagine why anyone would want to tease James, but it's not as important to know why someone did it as it is to know that these things may happen, and that you can't always protect your brother or sister. What you can do for people with cancer is try to understand how they feel and help them see that they still have friends. And, if you tease them from time to time, like you did before they had cancer, it's not a bad thing, as long as you don't keep it up for long or keep doing it when you see that it really hurts their feelings. Brothers and sisters all tease each other, and it's important that, even when your brother or sister has cancer, you treat each other as much like before as you can.

You may be shocked if the person who has cancer looks different after coming home.

**"My dad has cancer, and he was in the hospital for a long time. When he finally got to come home, he was still really sick. I had to help him up the stairs because he was so weak. It was strange, because he had always been so big and strong, and now he was weak. It bothered me." – Richard, age 16**

Even if someone tells you that your family member won't look the same, you may not be prepared for the changes. Try to find out what type of changes to expect. It may be hard for you, but it's important to remember that, even if they look different, they're still the same person.

## Changing

Some young people who have a family member with cancer may change a little themselves. Sometimes they don't realize it or don't know why. But, with all the new and different experiences and feelings, it's not surprising that people change. They may have trouble at school or be unable to concentrate or to get along with other people as well as they did before.

They may start to be a little less careful or do things that are dangerous, maybe getting hurt more often.



They may worry a lot about getting sick themselves and may even get sick more often. Their school grades may fall, or they may become more involved in school than they were before and make better grades.

Any of these changes can happen because young people who are scared or worried or whose lives have changed may need more attention at home. Just as with other problems or worries, it helps to talk with people who care and understand what's happening.

If you haven't noticed that you have changed, someone else may notice and want to talk to you about it. If they do, it's because they want to help. Your parents or teachers or social workers at the hospital or clinic all may be able to help if you've changed in a way that isn't good for you or that makes you sad and uncomfortable.

Not all of the changes are bad; some may be good. Many young people who have had cancer in the family felt it has helped them grow up. Others say it also has brought their family closer together.

**"My brother is in remission now. Things were pretty bad at first. Then, after a while, things sort of settled down and got back to the way they were before. I think Billy's cancer brought us all closer together. I get along better with him and my sister and even with my older brother now. I'm closer to mom and dad. And I think we all grew up a lot while he was sick." – Alice, age 15**

## How Your Parents Feel

If someone in your family has cancer, you may wonder how your parents feel. There's no one answer to this question. Just like everyone else, parents may feel many different things when they have cancer themselves or when another member of their family does. They may be worried, scared, tired, or a little confused by all the decisions they need to make and all the changes that cancer can bring. Along with this, parents want to be strong so they can help everyone else, and they want to keep the family together during this time. They may feel that they don't have enough energy to do all the things they would like to do or share all they'd like to with other family members. This section tells some things parents have said about how they feel.

A parent who has cancer may worry that by being sick they are upsetting the family's life.

**"I feel bad because now that I'm sick my husband tries to be with me a lot. I think my children's feelings are hurt but they won't say so. I just wish we could talk about it as a family."**

Or parents may know that being sick means that they can't do some things with their children that other parents do. They may wish they could, and they feel guilty.

**"I feel like I'm letting my son down, like I'm not being a real father because I can't run around with him the way other fathers do."**



When this happens, parents find they need to look for something they can do with their children that they'll all enjoy.

A parent whose husband or wife has cancer often needs to learn to do new things for their family and may be concerned about how well they'll do.

**"Now that my wife is sick, I need to be both mother and father while she's in the hospital. I'm afraid I don't do as good a job at some things as she does. The other day, our youngest son said 'Mommy never scrambled eggs like that.' I don't blame him, I'd rather eat her cooking, too. I asked her how she scrambles eggs and now at least breakfast tastes a little better."**

Parents don't expect their children to pretend that everything is all right or tastes great when it doesn't. Even if they get mad for a while, most parents would rather hear what other family members feel than not know when others are upset.

Parents may know when they've been treating a child with cancer differently than they treat the others or when they've been short-tempered. They may feel like they can't help it but still wish it didn't happen.

**"After I spend a day in the pediatrics clinic with Lisa, I'm so drained when I get home that I yell at my other kids over little things. Then they get upset, and I get more upset because I know that I shouldn't have done that."**

Some parents worry that their children are upset, and even though they want to help their children, they don't know what to do. Sometimes this is because young people don't want to talk to their parents about cancer. They may be afraid that their parents will worry or won't understand. In fact, most parents worry more if they feel you are upset, but they don't know why, or you won't discuss it with them.

**"Since I've been sick, my kids have changed. I know something is bothering them, but when I ask what it is, they say it's nothing I just wish they would talk about it. I want to help them."**

Often, one thing young people can do to help is to talk about how they feel and give their parents a chance to say how they feel, too.

Parents say that they want their children to know that the family is there to help even when one of its members has cancer. Your family life may change when someone has cancer. The important thing, however, is that you're a family, and families solve problems together. If you need some extra help, talk with the doctor, nurse, or social worker. And remember: Even if life is a little different, you're still a family, and your family is still there for you.

## Putting It All Together

There are many different ways to think and feel about having a person with cancer in your family. It's important to remember that people can learn to adjust to changes in their lives. Sometimes it takes a little work, but you can almost always find something or someone who can help you when you need it. Keep trying and don't be afraid to ask for help.



## Resources

As you and your family learn to cope with cancer, you undoubtedly will have many questions. Information about cancer is available from many sources, including the ones listed below. You may wish to check for additional information at your local library or bookstore and from support groups in your community.

### Cancer Information Service

The Cancer Information Service, a program of the National Cancer Institute, is a nationwide telephone service for cancer patients and their families and friends, the public, and health care professionals. The staff can answer questions (in English or Spanish) and can send National Cancer Institute booklets about cancer. They also know about local resources and services. One toll-free number, 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237), connects callers all over the country with the office that serves their area.



### American Cancer Society

The American Cancer Society is a voluntary organization with a national office and local units all over the country. This organization supports research, conducts educational programs, and offers many services to patients and their families. The American Cancer Society also provides free booklets on cancer. To obtain booklets, or for information about services and activities in local areas, call the Society's toll-free number, 1-800-ACS-2345, or the number listed under American Cancer Society in the white pages of the telephone book.