

How to Prepare

Where and when to have the conversation

The initial conversation is opening the door, letting the child know it is okay to talk about what is going on and helping them feel included from the beginning.

- Avoid having the conversation right before a transition, like going to school or bed time.
- Pick a place where the child feels private and comfortable.
- Decide if it feels best as a parent to share the news, or to just be present as and have another safe person say the words.
- If there are multiple children of different ages, think through if separate conversations would be better, or talking all together.

Be honest

The initial conversation is meant to open the door and let your child know that in the future any and all questions, comments, emotions, etc., are welcomed and it will be a safe place.

- It is ok to answer a question with “I don’t know”.
- Not everything needs to be said in the first conversation and it most likely won't be.

What do they know about cancer

Seek to understand what your child already knows about the term cancer (either from books, media, or past experiences)

- It is common for a child to pick up on bits of information and create an incomplete picture or misconceptions, so it is helpful to know what their understanding already is, and what you might need to clarify.

Plan for follow-up

Make a plan to check in periodically to create space for questions that may be lingering.

- Through repetition, children are able to begin to understand complex topics.
- Revisit things you have previously talked about or ask them to repeat back their understanding.
- Don't be surprised if a child gravitates towards play immediately following a hard conversation. Play is a safe, familiar place for them.
- If possible, identify another loved one who the child can ask question and talk with; children want to protect their caregiver as much as the caregiver wants to protect them and may hesitate to ask the hard questions.
 - Identify a trusted adult they can go to at school if they are having questions, worries or need a break.



Adult with Cancer Conversation

Script for talking to your children about a Loved One with cancer.

Scripts and Talking Points

We use the term 'Loved One' throughout the script, but it can be replaced with the name or kinship term (mom, grandma, auntie) the child uses for the adult.

Beginning the Conversation

Give them a heads-up that a serious topic is coming:

- "I have something important to talk to you about."

What have they noticed/What do they already know

Relate back to what they have experienced, seen, or observed happening with their loved one:

- "Have you noticed your loved one has been feeling tired?"
- "You know how your loved one hasn't had the energy to play with you lately?"

Developmentally appropriate explanation of cancer

When talking to younger kids (age 3 - 5 developmentally)

- "Your loved one has not been feeling well because their body is sick, they have something called cancer."
- "Cancer is a different type of sick that happens inside the body, it is not the same sickness as a cold or flu."
- "No one can catch cancer and no one, not you or I, did anything to make your loved one have cancer."
- "When this happens, it can make someone feel sick, tired, or cause them to have pain."

When talking to older kids (6 - 12 years)

- "Your loved one has something called cancer."
- "All of our bodies are made up of teeny-tiny things cells. Each healthy cell has a job, and when they work together they help our bodies work."
- "When someone has cancer, unhealthy cells start to grow inside someone's body, they are not supposed to be there and actually block the healthy cells from being able to do their jobs."
- "This can make someone feel sick, tired, or have pain."

When talking to a teen

- "Your loved one visited the doctor and they discovered they have cancer."
- "The cancer is located in their lungs, they will need to have surgery and receive chemotherapy."
 - you can provide more concrete anatomical information for this age group, such as where the cancer is located, what medical providers have shared, and the initial plan for treatment.



Adult with Cancer Conversation

Script for talking to your children about and adult with cancer.

Reassure

Help them know what is actively happening to help

- “There is a whole team of doctors and nurses that are working very hard to help get rid of the cancer cells in your loved one’s body.”

Give them a job or role

Explain what will stay the same, and what is expected of them, especially if the person is living in their household

- “Right now, our job as a family is the same as it always is...”
 - Attending school and activities
 - Routines
 - Values or practices that are familiar to your family

Let them know how they can participate in the care

- “Your job is to give your loved one hugs and let them know you love them and help keep our bodies healthy by washing our hands.”
 - If appropriate, provide them with specific roles to help with the overall family needs, or help care for the adult with cancer

Discuss changes they might experience

Help prepare them for what might be different in their day-to-day

- “For right now, Grandma will be driving you to school.”
 - What aspects of their day our routine will change, and who will help them do these things (get to and from places, do bedtime routine with).
 - Reassure them that they will still be cared for and they will still be able to participate in typical activities/routines.

Continue the Conversation

Keep the door open for further conversations and support

- “We don’t have all of the answers right now. The plan is to gather more information and when we have more of a plan we will talk to you about it.”
- “We want you to know you can come to us with any questions or feelings that you have.”
- “I am feelings confused, and you might see a lot of other people in the family feeling the same way.”
 - “I wonder if you know how you are feeling right now?”
 - “Or if you want to make a plan for who you can talk to if you are having feelings about all of this?”