

Talking to your children and supporting them after being diagnosed with cancer



You've been diagnosed with cancer. Now you're wondering when and how to tell the kids. Here's some advice to help you support them at this difficult time.

Is it really important to tell my child that I have cancer?

Most parents don't know how to announce such news. They're afraid of upsetting their child or bursting into tears themselves. These fears are very natural, of course.

However, children need to know the truth so they can adjust to the situation. Talking about it will help your children understand what's going on; in any event, they're bound to feel that something unusual is going on.

Truth and honesty are extremely important.

Children who aren't told the truth may imagine a scenario that's even worse. Some may even feel they're responsible for their parent's problem.

If they learn about the cancer by chance, they'll feel betrayed. So it's important to spell things out. Here are some tips to guide you through this crucial conversation.

When should I tell them the news?

It's best to tell the kids as soon as possible. This will help create a sense of trust as you deal with your disease.

How do I talk about it?

This is an important moment. Be prepared. Here are some tips to help you.

- > Choose a time when it's quiet in the house.
- > Get the other parent involved if possible. If not, ask another adult you trust to be there. That person will be able to support you if necessary, as well as your child.
- > Choose your words according to the age of your child.



- > You might want to start with a story (see list for suggestions of appropriate books and movies).
- > Express your feelings and encourage your child to do the same. For example, you might say, “Mummy’s sad because Daddy’s sick.”.
- > Make sure your child really understands the news. Ask questions. For example, “Can you say that in your own words?”.

Say it simply, without being too heavy-handed. You don’t need to give a lot of details.

It’s better to have a few short conversations and reveal information bit by bit – especially with very young children. Let the kids absorb the information at their own pace.

What should I say?

First of all, it’s important to tell your child:

- that you have cancer (use the word) and what type of cancer (e.g. leukemia)
- that cancer is not contagious, like a cold
- that it’s not your child’s fault you have cancer
- what will change in his or her life and what will stay the same
- that you’ll keep your child posted on what’s happening as soon as you have any information
- how long your treatments are expected to last
- what changes your child will see in you (e.g. bandages, tubes, hair loss, fatigue, sleeping a lot)

Children will ask questions when they’re ready to hear the answers.

If they ask about death, tell them about the risks associated with the disease. “I don’t know if I’m going to die. I’m doing everything I can to get better. Right now, I believe things will go well.”

How do children react when a parent gets sick?

Every child will react differently, depending on their age and character, among other things. Your kids may feel anxious, afraid, angry, guilty, powerless or just plain sad. All of this is quite normal.

If you can identify your child’s reactions, you’ll find it easier to understand what they’re going through. That will help you feel less powerless and more able to really “be there” for your child.

It’s normal for your child’s behaviour to change for a while. That’s the child’s way of expressing pain and distress.

For example, your child may:

- show regressive behaviour, e.g. wetting the bed, asking to sleep with you, or needing a lot of reassurance
- act agitated or unruly (even a child who’s normally calm by nature)
- have trouble getting to sleep
- have trouble concentrating at school



Does my child need professional help?

The best way to find out is to observe your child's reactions in terms of **intensity and length**. That's what really counts, because the reactions themselves are normal in this situation.

Get professional psychological help if your child has:

- persistent or extremely intense reactions
- reactions that prevent him or her from functioning normally, e.g. repeated and/or intense tantrums, acting withdrawn, skipping favourite activities, low energy, extreme passiveness, or not doing well at school.



If you or a professional (teacher, daycare provider) feel concerned, it may be wise to consult a psychologist.

How can I help my child from day to day?

There are several approaches that can help your child get through this situation and feel more secure.

> Maintain your routine

Children need a consistent framework to feel that life goes on. Routines help to reduce their level of stress. The morning ritual, homework time and your bedtime routine, for example, should be kept the same as much as possible.



> Give your child an active role to play

Encouraging children to perform certain tasks will help them feel useful. For example, making the bed in the morning, setting the table, picking up toys, or fetching a glass of water will make your child feel able to help. It's important to be clear on what you expect. Express your appreciation when your child helps - that's comforting, too.

> Find some support

Make sure you have good people around you. Feel free to ask for help and say what you need. This holds true for emotional support, and for family tasks: helping with meals, taking you to appointments, taking the kids to school, running errands, etc.

Don't think twice about asking your family, friends, neighbours, etc. for help. It's also a good idea to tell the responsible adults in your child's life about the cancer - daycare providers, teachers, the parents of some friends. This will create a support network.



Who should I ask to get psychological help for my child?

Here are some people you can contact:

A psychologist from the CHUM.

The psychologist on your oncology team can help you find the best approach for your child. Ask a member of your care team to make an appointment.

Your local CLSC.

For information on services and resources that are available in your region, call:

> 1 800 707-3380

On the Web:

> sante.gouv.qc.ca/en/repertoire-ressources/

Order of Psychologists of Quebec.

The Order runs a referral service. Be sure to specify that you're looking for a child psychologist, call:

> 514 738-1223 or 1 800 561-1223

On the Web:

> ordrepsy.qc.ca (In French only)



KEEP IN MIND

What counts most of all:

- tell your kids the truth, in words they can understand at their age
- let them express their emotions
- reassure them; for example, name people who can take care of them
- get them to continue with their everyday activities and chores, depending on their abilities
- tell them that they won't always feel this bad - this will pass



USEFUL RESOURCES

Book:

Luron apprivoise les forces de l'espoir
Line St-Amour, éd. Un monde différent
(French only)

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them
on our website

chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante



Questions



Resource people and contacts

The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal
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