



Providence Cancer Center Family Program

A resource for parents and children to help *everyone* cope with cancer

Cancer: a family affair

When one family member has cancer, the whole family is affected. When that family member is a parent, he or she can be overwhelmed with trying to understand the diagnosis and the treatment options, coping with personal reactions and emotions, and considering how the illness will affect the family. Providing your children with open and honest information from the beginning of the diagnosis will lead to feelings of trust, control and involvement.

Child experts recommend that children be involved in any illnesses that affect the family, yet parents are often at a loss to know exactly what to do. Recognizing this, we have provided some guidelines to help you during this difficult time.

Establish open communication

- Be truthful, open and direct with information. This will help to develop trust and reduce fear in children.
- Include children in what is happening. Children can sense problems and difficulties and, if left out of the situation, they usually imagine things to be much worse than they actually are.
- Encourage children to come to you with questions. Let them know that if you are unable to answer at the time, you will get back to them.
- Remember that children want to understand what is happening. They often worry about what will happen to them and who will care for them when a parent is ill.
- Realize that it's normal for children to have questions about death or to have fears that the parent might die. Do not promise that you will not die, but reassure them that you are willing to speak with them about their fears.

Realize there is no "right way"

- Recognize that children respond in many different ways to a parent's illness. Some may want to stay close and care for the parent; others may need to spend more time with their friends. Allow for individual differences in your children.
- Know when to seek outside help for your children. If children behave or speak in ways that may be harmful to themselves or to others, it's important to get help.

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Understand developmental needs

- Keep age in mind. Younger children need simple but truthful information, whereas older children can understand much more.
- Realize that children engage in “magical thinking.” They often believe the world revolves around them and that they can make things happen. Be sure to tell them that nothing they did caused the cancer.
- Children’s behavior gives clues to their feelings. They often act out their feelings rather than find words for them. Parents and children can and do learn to cope with cancer and its treatments.
- Accept that children’s behavior may regress. Children often revert to younger behavior during times of stress. Try to respond in a supportive way.

Balance care and concern

- Try to maintain some routine and structure at home. Give children opportunities to perform age-appropriate caregiving tasks each day.
- Children often worry that they may “catch” the cancer. Reassure them that cancer is not contagious.
- Include children in the medical aspects of your illness as appropriate. They may want to meet your physician or see where you go for treatment.
- Remember that children take cues from the adults. The way children react to a cancer diagnosis and treatment often depends on how their parents and other close adults handle the situation.
- Communicating with schoolteachers about the diagnosis can help them better support your children. For some children, it’s helpful to know there is an adult at school they can go to if they are having a difficult time.

Take care of yourself

- Let children see you express your feelings. It’s OK for them to see you cry. Explain how you are feeling and show them you can cope. Tell them it is not their responsibility to help you feel better.
- Keep in mind that a parent’s job is not to protect children from challenges in the world but to show them how to cope with challenges that arise.
- Take time for yourself! Parents are more effective when they take care of their own needs. Make a list of things you enjoy and invest time in you.

Learn more about Providence Cancer Center Family Program services

- Cancer resource literature
- Monthly support group meetings for adults and children
- Telephone support for parents
- Individual counseling
- Referrals to child therapists as needed

For more information about Providence Cancer Center Family Program, please call 503-215-6014 or visit www.providence.org/oregon/cancer.

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