

Talking with Children about Cancer

When talking with children about cancer, there are some key topics to cover.

- **Use the word cancer.** It may feel gentler to say *“Mom is sick,”* but this can lead to confusion for young children. If children are told that a loved one with cancer is *“sick,”* they may become scared the next time they catch a cold, or a family member has a virus, thinking that they will need chemo, or may die. Instead, say *“Mom has cancer.”*
- **Explain what, and where, the cancer is.** Our body is made up of cells, the same way a lego car is made up of legos. Cells are the itty bitty building blocks that make up all the parts of our body. All the parts of our body have jobs to do. Our feet help us walk, our lungs help us breathe, and our mouth helps us smile. Cancer is a type of cell that grows in our body that does not have a job. It is a cell that does not work right. It makes it hard for the cells around it to do their jobs, too. *“Dad has cancer cells growing in his lungs. This makes it hard for him to breathe. The doctors and nurses give him extra air, called oxygen, to help make it easier for him to breathe.”*
- **If their loved one will receive chemo:** Chemo is a special medicine that fights cancer cells. The medicine fights all the cells that grow very fast, like cancer cells. The cells that make up hair and cover the inside of our mouth and stomach also grow very fast. Sometimes the chemo medicine fights these cells, too. *“If that happens, your brother’s hair may come out, and he may have a tummy ache for a while. This will make him look very different than what you’re used to. But it is a good sign that the chemo medicine is working hard.”*
- **There are different types of cancer.** There are lots of different kinds of cancer. Some cancers are very easy to treat, and usually get better. Other cancers are very hard to treat, and may not get better. *“Your cousin has a kind of cancer that grows on her skin. People with this kind of cancer usually get better.”* Some types of cancer make tumors. A tumor is lots of cancer cells growing together in one place. *“Your sister has a small tumor growing in her brain. The tumor is in the part of her brain that helps her balance. That is why she has been falling down a lot.”*
- **Most people go their whole lives without having cancer.** About 30% to 40% of people have some type of cancer in their lifetime.
- **Cancer is nobody’s fault.** Nothing you did, said, thought, or wished caused the cancer to happen.
- **Cancer is not contagious.** You cannot catch it from someone else, or give it to someone else. *“You cannot catch cancer from your dad. Your dad did not catch cancer from anyone else.”*

Websites:

- www.cancer.org
- www.cancerreallysucks.org
- www.childrenstreehousefdn.org

