

How Do I Tell My Children?

When a parent is sick, it's normal to want to protect their children from harm or worry. But if you have a chronic illness, it's best to talk about it. Hiding the truth can do more harm than good. Kids notice when things change. They may already know something is wrong.

Share simple, honest facts about your illness and care. This will help your children cope with the changes an illness can bring in the family.

What to Share:

- Share facts. With the internet, your kids can look up anything. If you don't give your kids direct facts, they will figure it out or find worse online.
- Be open and honest in your talks. Let your kids ask questions. It's OK to say "I don't know." Saying this helps create a space to talk openly.
- Name the illness. Don't just say you are "sick". This lets children know your illness is not like when they get sick with a cold.
- Prepare them for changes they may see in you, such as hair loss, fatigue, and weight loss.

How to Share:

- Have your talks in a space that feels calm and safe.
- If you need support, ask someone to be there with you. They can step in and help explain if you feel like it's too much.
- You know your children best. Think about their unique needs when you share facts that may be hard to hear.
- You will need to have more than one talk. Children need time to process information.
- Children may ask the same things over and over for a while.

How to Support:

- Give them a list of resources they might use. Ask your care team about these.
- Find out if there is a social worker or a safe person they can talk to. This could be someone at school, church, or in the community.
- Bring them with you to doctor or clinic visits. Show them where you go for treatments.
- Let them ask your care team questions.
- Help them learn about where you get care and what happens when you go there.
- Offer them resources at home, such as a journal to write in or time alone with you.
- Check in often. Tell them about changes in your treatment or health.

Tips for Talking to Your Children

Young Children (age 3 to 7)

Here's what you can expect with this age group:

- Simple ideas about illness: you get sick, you get better
- More concerned about how this affects their daily life and routines
- May think they caused the illness
- May think they can catch the illness
- Hard time being away from their parent

Tips for Helping Young Children

- Use simple words and give simple facts.
- Tell them what to expect with their routine. Try to keep a normal routine as much as you can.
- Make sure they know that no one is to blame for the illness. Tell them they did not cause their parent to get sick.
- Set aside time for each child to be with their sick parent. Let your children know parents are still parents even if their body and looks change.
- Help them express their feelings through play or art.
- These books may help:
 - **No Where Hair** by Sue Glader
 - **Mommy Has a Boo Boo** by Marci Greenberg Cox

School Age Children (age 7 to 12)

Here's what you can expect with this age group:

- Know about the body and how it works
- Know that illness may be simple or may be complex
- May feel the illness is their fault

Tips for Helping School Age Children

- Give an honest account of the illness and what to expect with treatments.
- Name the illness and make sure they know they can't catch it.
- Keep a stable routine with school and hobbies.
- Let your child ask questions or write down questions they have about treatments.
- Help them express their feelings through play or art.
- Find a safe adult (who is not their parent) who they can talk to.
- These books may help:
 - **What Happens When Someone I Love Has Cancer** by Sara Olsher
 - **Cancer Party** by Sara Olsher
 - **My Mom is Sick and It's Okay** by Angie McPherson
 - **Mama's Year with Cancer** by Nancy Churmin

Teenage Children (13-18)

Here's what you can expect with this age group:

- Starting to do more on their own
- Stress from school, friends, and social life
- Hormone changes and body changes
- Know how illness works and what causes it
- May have had a loved one die
- Friends and classmates play a big role in their life

Tips for Helping Teenage Children

- Have honest, open talks about the illness and treatments.
- Listen if they ask questions or want to share their feelings.
- Keep a stable routine with school, hobbies, and friends.
- Find a safe adult (who is not their parent) who they can talk to or ask questions. This could be a medical staff person or someone from your care team.
- Help them try journal writing, art, or music to express their feelings.
- Help them stay in touch with friends and their social life.

Young Adults (18+)

- Do things on their own, may live outside the house
- Busy with college classes or a job
- Role change, may need to take care of their parent
- Concerns about illness parents may pass down through their genes

Tips for Helping Young Adults

- Share honest and complete info about your illness and treatments.
- Include them in talks with your care team. Let them ask your care team questions.
- Keep up your support of their career or studies.
- Have open talks with them about your illness. Listen and support them when they express their feelings.
- Suggest a peer-to-peer support group they might join.

This handout was created by the Child Life Specialists at Atrium Health Levine Children's Hospital and Atrium Health Levine Children's Brenner Children's Hospital, with support from the Adolescent and Young Adult (AYA) Program.