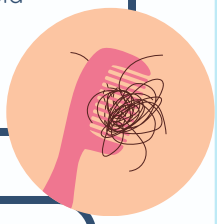


TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT YOUR CANCER

SHOULD I TELL MY CHILD?

Does my child need to know I have cancer? Can't I keep my child from unnecessary distress by not telling them about my diagnosis? If you have these thoughts, you are not alone. Research shows that many parents are uncertain if they should tell their child about their cancer diagnosis largely due to a desire to protect them emotionally (Stein et al., 2019). While this is an individual and personal decision, research also shows that withholding information about your health can cause your child anxiety and fear as they observe changes due to your condition (Stein et al., 2019). This may include them noticing your absence due to doctors visits, hair loss from chemotherapy, weight loss and increased fatigue. For instance, one study revealed that children as young as six knew that "something was seriously wrong" before being told their parent had cancer (Stein et al., 2019). This is important because young children may be prone to form misconceptions and lack emotional support if their parents do not openly communicate with them about their condition and prognosis(Stein et al., 2019).



HOW TO TALK ABOUT IT?

- **Involve others**

Telling your child you have cancer can be very difficult, but you do not have to do it alone. In fact, it is preferable that both of the child's parents are present when the cancer diagnosis is shared (Semple et al., 2022). However, if this is not possible seeking support from other family members, friends, or members of the health care team, such as a Child Life Specialist, can be beneficial (Stein et al., 2019).

- **Choose a private space and schedule time**

When telling your child about your diagnosis, it is important that you choose a time when there are no other impending obligations for you or your child (Semple et al., 2022). Additionally, choose a quiet space, such as your home, that the child feels comfortable in (Semple et al., 2022). These considerations will help ensure that all pertinent thoughts and emotions are able be expressed.

- **Share developmentally appropriate information**

It is no surprise that children of different ages have vastly different cognitive abilities. This makes it important to tailor the information you share with your child to their cognitive level (Stein et al., 2019). For instance, it can be helpful to present information to young children through play (Rollins et al., 2017). An example of this is showing where the cancer is located in your body using a stuffed animal or making up a game about "good cells" and "bad cancers cells." It is also important to let young children know that they did not do anything to cause your cancer and that they do not have to fear "catching" cancer from you (Semple et al., 2022). If your child is school aged, it becomes important that they know how treatments will affect you now and in the future (Rollins et al., 2017). This should be explained in simple, honest and concrete terms. For instance, "Mommy has to do a special treatment called chemotherapy, the doctors say this will help stop the cancer from spreading in her body. But, you may notice she'll be really tired for awhile and will start losing her hair." Additionally, it can be helpful to ask your child how they would explain your illness to other to see how much they understand and to give you an opportunity to correct any misconceptions they might have(Stein et al., 2019).

- **Reassure children that distress is normal**

It can be beneficial for you to share with your child that it is okay to be scared or worried and that you feel this way too sometimes (Stein et al., 2019). You can encourage your child to ask questions about any concerns he/she has. If they do not present any in that moment, it is helpful to reassure your child are always able to come to you for support and to ask anything (Stein et al., 2019). This can help the child feel closer to you emotionally.



REFERENCES

Rollins, J. A., Bolig, R., & Mahan, C. C. (2017). Meeting children's needs psychosocial needs across the healthcare continuum. Pro-ed: Austin, TX.

Semple, C. J., McCaughan, E., Smith, R., & Hanna, J. R. (2022). Parent's with incurable cancer: 'Nuts and bolts' of how professionals can support parents to communicate with their dependent children. Patient Education and Counseling, 105(3), 775–780.

Stein, A., Dalton, L., Rapa, E., Bluebond-Langner, M., Hanington, L., Stein, K. F., ... Yousafzai, A. (2019). Communication with children and adolescents about the diagnosis of their own life-threatening condition. The Lancet (British Edition), 393(10176), 1150–1163.