

## Where to Start...Talking to Children and Teens about Cancer

### Information to help you talk to children or teens about cancer

A cancer diagnosis affects the whole family, including children. It is important to let children ask questions, share worries, and be part of the care of the person with cancer.

One of the first things parents and caregivers worry about when they get a cancer diagnosis is how they are going to share this news with their children. The information below may help you talk to children and teens in your life about cancer.

### What questions may children have about cancer?

There are four common questions that children may have about cancer. Under each question below are tips to help you answer the question when you are talking to child(ren) about cancer.

#### Question 1: What is it called?

**Tip 1:** Be honest with children about cancer.

**Tip 2:** The first time you talk to children or teens about cancer, use the actual name of the illness.

- For example, use words like “cancer”, “leukemia”, or “tumour”. If your family chooses to call the cancer by a different name afterwards, that is okay.

**Tip 3:** Do not just say that the person with cancer is “sick”.

People can be sick for many reasons. Just saying that the person with cancer is “sick” can be confusing and scary for kids. The next time a loved one has a cold or other minor illness, the child may be afraid.

### Question 2: Did I cause it?

**Tip:** Let children know that it is not their fault that you or a family member has cancer. Explain to them that it is just something that happens.

Sometimes young children can feel responsible for bad things happening to themselves or other people in their lives. If your child feels guilty about your cancer, tell them that they did not do or say anything to cause your cancer.

### Question 3: Can I catch it?

**Tip:** Let the child or teen know that they cannot get cancer from you or anyone else.

Children and teens who know about cancer may wonder if cancer is contagious (can spread from one person to another). It is important to tell them that cancer cannot spread from one person to another.

### Question 4: Who will care for me?

**Tip 1:** Tell children who will help take care of them while you or a loved one are getting cancer treatment.

Sometimes a child’s biggest worry is about routine and normal life. Children might wonder, “If daddy is at the hospital, who will drive me to school?” You can help by:

- Letting children know that someone will always be around to care for them.
- Coming up with a routine together for days that you or a loved one is getting cancer treatment, or for when there are days that you or your loved one with cancer is not well.

**Tip 2:** Let children know that it is okay to have a hard time with change.

Change is hard. Let children or teens know that the change is hard for you too. Remind them that you are all in this together, and that you are available to them when they need to talk to someone.

## Where can I learn more about how to talk to children or teens about cancer?

### Websites:

1. ReThink Breast Cancer

- Go to the [Resources for Young Families](https://rethinkbreastcancer.com/resources-for-young-families/) page on their website:  
<https://rethinkbreastcancer.com/resources-for-young-families/>

### Videos:

2. Telling your children you have cancer (by Fruit Fly Collective)

- To watch this video, visit the [Cancer Services webpage](http://trilliumhealthpartners.ca/patientservices/CancerServices) on Trillium Health Partners website:  
<http://trilliumhealthpartners.ca/patientservices/CancerServices>

## How can I help my child(ren) cope with cancer in the family?

If child(ren) need help dealing with their thoughts and feelings (coping) after learning about cancer, there are many options for support. You can use one of the services below to get support for you and the child(ren).

### Community Services:

1. Call the child's school to speak to a school board social worker

2. Halton Family Services – Thrive Counselling Services Inc.
  - Call: 905-845-3811
  - [E-mail](mailto:info@thrivecounselling.org): info@thrivecounselling.org
  - For more information, visit [Thrive Counselling's website](http://www.thrivecounselling.org):  
www.thrivecounselling.org
  
3. Catholic Family Services – Peel-Dufferin
  - In Brampton, call: 905-450-1608
  - In Mississauga, call: 905-897-1644
  - In Dufferin region, call: 1-888-940-0584
  - For more information, visit [Catholic Family Services website](http://www.cfspd.com):  
http://www.cfspd.com
  
4. Family Services of Peel
  - Call: 905-270-2250
  - For more information, visit [Family Services of Peel website](http://www.fspeel.org/):  
http://www.fspeel.org/
  
5. Wellspring
  - To contact their Oakville location, call: 905-257-1988
  - To contact their Brampton location, call: 905-792-6480
  - For more information, visit [Wellspring's website](http://www.wellspring.ca): www.wellspring.ca
  
6. Gilda's Club- Toronto
  - Call: 416-214-9898
  - For more information, visit [Gilda's Club Toronto Website](https://gildasclubtoronto.org/):  
https://gildasclubtoronto.org/

### Online Resources:

1. **Cancer in my Family** by B.C. Cancer Agency
  - Go to the [Cancer in my Family website](http://www.cancerinmyfamily.ca/):  
http://www.cancerinmyfamily.ca/

This is a website for children who have a family member with cancer. On this website, these children can play games, learn about cancer, and explore their feelings or worries about cancer.

2. **Start the Talk** by the Canadian Association of Psychosocial Oncology

- Go to the [Start the Talk website](https://startthetalk.ca/): <https://startthetalk.ca/>

This website has online learning to help you support a child or teen when a family member has cancer.

3. **Talking to children about Cancer** by the Canadian Cancer Society

- Go to the [webpage on the Canadian Cancer Society's website](https://www.cancer.ca/en/cancer-information/living-with-cancer/talking-about-cancer/talking-to-children-about-cancer/?region=on): <https://www.cancer.ca/en/cancer-information/living-with-cancer/talking-about-cancer/talking-to-children-about-cancer/?region=on>

This page has information about how to help children understand a family member's cancer diagnosis.

**Important Note:**

Trillium Health Partners made this document to provide patients, families and caregivers with resources to help them talk to children and teens about cancer. Trillium Health Partners does not endorse any community services or resources mentioned in this document. The information in this document does not replace medical advice. Every effort has been made to ensure information in this document is complete, correct and up-to-date but no guarantee is made to that effect. By using this document, you agree to use any of the resources mentioned at your own risk. If you have any questions or concerns about the information in this document, please talk to your healthcare team.

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