American Cancer Society

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How to Cope if Your Child Has Cancer

Learning that your child has cancer is likely one of the hardest moments for a parent or caregiver to go through. Both your life and your child’s life are forever changed in an instant. It can feel overwhelming, scary, and confusing.

You’re going to get a lot of information in a short period of time. You might not think caring for yourself is a priority while dealing with your child’s new cancer diagnosis. But you need to take care of yourself to be able to support your child effectively.

Here are some ideas and resources to help parents and caregivers cope during the first few weeks after your child’s diagnosis.

Common feelings and emotions when a child has cancer

There are no right or wrong feelings when you learn your child has cancer. And you are not alone. Many other parents of children with cancer have felt the same things.

Some of the most common feelings and emotions parents say they have include:

- Shock
- Disbelief
- Denial
- Fear

- Anxiety
- Overwhelm
- Confusion
- Guilt
- Sadness
- Anger
- Helplessness

No matter how you feel, you shouldn’t be ashamed. These are completely normal responses.

What parents and caregivers can do to cope

- Find support from social workers, counselors, nurses, psychologists, and doctors on your child’s cancer care team.
- Ask for help from family and friends. You don’t have to do it all alone.
- Find support from trusted faith leaders and get spiritual guidance.
- Join a support group. Talking to others who have gone through or are going through a similar experience can help you feel less alone and answer questions you might have.
- Find things to support your own mental health. It might be physical activity, reading, music, writing, or spending time with a pet.
- Take care of yourself. If you aren’t sleeping or eating, it can make negative thoughts, feelings, and emotions even worse.
- Talk to a mental health professional. They can help you deal with negative thoughts and build healthy ways to cope and express yourself.
- Talk to your primary care provider if you think medication might help.

Learning about treatment

You might be getting a lot of information about your child’s cancer and treatment. It would be hard for anyone to remember it all, but especially when you’re feeling stressed and overwhelmed. Try to take it one day at a time. You might even have to go one hour at a time. But you can do this.

Here are some things that might help as you talk to doctors and nurses, learn about treatments, and make decisions:

- Get to know the people on your child's cancer care team[1]. Learn what each person does and how they can support you.
- Ask if you can get a nurse navigator or social worker. They usually can give you resources and answer questions about managing your child’s care.
- Get a notebook and folder or a binder. Bring it to your child’s appointments to take notes, write down questions you want to ask, and keep track of papers.
- It might help to ask a family member or friend to be there and take notes as you talk with the cancer care team.
- Don’t be afraid to speak up if you missed something or didn’t understand. Ask them to repeat it or explain it in a different way. Ask for printed information to take home if that helps.
- Take time to read through the information the cancer care team gives you in a quiet space.
- Ask the cancer care team to focus on teaching you what you need to know to care for your child at home. If your child is in the hospital, ask about classes for parents of children with cancer.
- If you don’t have one already, sign your child up for your health care system’s online patient portal. You can usually see appointments, prescriptions, tests, and labs. Some also have messaging to your doctor’s office.
- If it’s helpful, you can ask for copies of test and lab results[2].
- Ask for help in getting a second opinion[3].
- Call the American Cancer Society or other reliable sources for more information about diagnosis[4] and treatment[5].
- Read about your child's type of cancer[6].

Creating a new normal

For the first few weeks, your family routines or schedule will likely be very different from what you’re used to. Your child might be in the hospital getting treatment. You might have other children at home. It might feel like you have too many places to be at once. Some parents say it feels like a blur or a dream.

Even though you might not have a lot of control over some of these things, it’s important to try to create some new routines, no matter how small. These routines can give you, your child, and the rest of your family even just a small piece of your day or week that doesn’t feel uncertain or unknown.

Here are some ideas and resources to help you keep or create routines while your child is getting treatment:

- Talk with your employer to find out what programs and resources are available to help you take time off or keep working during your child's treatment. There are different types of leave, including Family Medical Leave[7], that may be available. You might also be able to work from home or from the hospital, depending on your job.
- If people in your community and family offer to help, think about ways they can support your family's routines. They might drive siblings to school or to activities, provide meals, or help in other ways to keep your household running as smoothly as possible. Consider asking a friend or family member to be the contact person for managing and coordinating offers to help.
- Ask the cancer care team when and if your child may be able to return to school. It will help to know how and when schoolwork can be part of your child's life during treatment. See Going to School During and After Cancer Treatment[8] for more information.
- Ask the cancer care team for a schedule of treatments for the first few weeks, including how long they think appointments and treatments will last so you have an idea of how the days and weeks might flow.
- Talk with the cancer care team about what medicines your child will take at home and how they can be scheduled to match your family's routines with meals and bedtimes.
- Know that it will take time to create new routines and that your family will adjust.
- Be thoughtful about giving big gifts or rewards as a way of helping your child cope with their situation, because treatments can last several weeks, months, and sometimes years. It will be hard to have rewards and treats built into every hard treatment day over a long period of time. Talk with the health care team about smaller ways to provide encouragement for your child.
- CaringBridge[9] is a free online tool families can use to share health updates. You can also use their planner to let family and friends coordinate help with things like meals and errands.

Addressing your own needs

As a parent or caregiver, it's important not to neglect your own needs. Studies have shown that parents of children with cancer frequently have unmet needs, and this can lead to increased stress, depression, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder

(PTSD)[10].

The most common unmet needs of parents and caregivers of children with cancer include:

- **Information and communication**. Many parents and caregivers want more information on their child's health status, treatments, and disease. See Talking to Your Child's Cancer Care Team[11] for ideas.
- **Emotional support**. Parents and caregivers often need emotional and mental support from loved ones and space to express their feelings. Read more in Mental Health and Distress[12].
- **Financial support**. Parents and caregivers may need support and guidance on dealing with the everyday costs of life and treatment. Learn about your options in Cost of Cancer Care[13].

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/childhood-cancer/talking-to-your-childs-cancer-care-team.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/tests.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/finding-care/seeking-a-second-opinion.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging.html
5. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types.html
6. www.cancer.org/cancer/types.html
7. www.cancer.org/cancer/financial-insurance-matters/health-insurance-laws/family-and-medical-leave-act.html
8. www.cancer.org/cancer/childhood-cancer/going-to-school-during-and-after-cancer-treatment.html
9. www.caringbridge.org/
10. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/long-term-health-concerns/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-and-cancer.html
11. www.cancer.org/cancer/childhood-cancer/talking-to-your-childs-cancer-care-team.html
12. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/emotional-mood-

changes.html
13. www.cancer.org/cancer/financial-insurance-matters/managing-costs.html

References

American Society of Clinical Oncology. Childhood cancer resources. Accessed at cancer.net. Content is no longer available.

Lewandowska A. The needs of parents of children suffering from cancer—continuation of research. *Children*. 2022; 9(2):144. Accessed September 27, 2023. doi.org/10.3390/children9020144

Phiri, L, Li, WHC, Cheung, AT, Phiri, PGMC. Effectiveness of psychoeducation interventions in reducing negative psychological outcomes and improving coping skills in caregivers of children with cancer: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psycho Oncol*. 2023; 1-14. Accessed September 27, 2023. doi.org/10.1002/pon.6208

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