When a parent or loved one is diagnosed with cancer, a common first worry is “How are my kids going to react?” Each family has its own way of handling stress. As a parent, you are the expert when it comes to talking with your kids about cancer—your own diagnosis or a loved one’s. The information here might help at this challenging time.

Why Kids Need to Know
Studies show that children have less anxiety and a more positive response to a parent’s or loved one’s illness if they are given accurate information that’s right for their age. Children are very quick to pick up on stress in your family. Many times their imagined fears are worse than the reality of the situation.

When Kids Need to Know
Talk to your child as soon as you feel comfortable. Although you may be worried about the conversation, kids often feel hurt if they learn about something by overhearing it or hearing it from someone else first.

What Kids Need to Know
Children and teens need to know when someone in the family has cancer. It’s important to use the word “cancer” so they can distinguish it from other illnesses. Your child will want to know where the cancer is in the body. Children need to be reassured they did not cause the disease and that they can’t “catch” cancer. It’s also important to let your child know that many people survive cancer.

Remember, kids can learn and grow from a loved one’s illness. A challenge such as this may lead everyone in your family to develop more sensitivity and compassion for others. Getting through this stressful time can also bring a feeling of pride and self-worth—for kids and grown ups.

Ways You Can Help
Here are some ways you can help kids cope when a parent or loved one has cancer:

Talk to Them
• Encourage your kids to ask questions without pushing them to talk if they don't want to.
• Ask open-ended questions such as “What is the most confusing part of mom’s cancer?” and “What do your friends say to you about my cancer?”
• Encourage your child to express thoughts and feelings.
• Share your own thoughts and feelings with your child.

Give Them Helpful Information
• Let your child know what to expect along the way. This will help your child prepare for changes that can happen because of the illness or side effects of treatment.
• Help your child identify grown-ups he or she can go to for support or to talk.
• Make sure your children know who will take care of them if you need to be hospitalized.
• Avoid making promises you’re not sure you can keep.
• Don’t worry your kids with details they can’t do anything about such as money problems.

Manage Their Time
• Sit down to meals together, limit visitors, and turn off phones so you can focus all your attention on each other.
• When the person with cancer isn’t feeling well, plan play dates or fun activities with others.
• Do your best to keep a regular structure and routine.
• Give your child options about extra chores or ways to help around the house.
Accepting Feelings

It’s not easy to help kids with their feelings about a cancer diagnosis when adults are still trying to sort out their own. For yourself and for your kids, remember all feelings are okay. Here are some common things children may feel:

- Fear of losing the person with cancer and not wanting to let that person out of their sight
- Anger that your lives are different since the cancer diagnosis
- Disappointment if you don’t feel well enough to do some of the activities you used to do together
- Guilt or worry that they somehow caused the cancer
- Resentment about having to help you or do extra chores around the house

Remember feelings will come and go. The most helpful thing to do is listen and accept your child’s feelings (and your own) without judgment.

Children may also have these feelings and issues:

- Problems at school such as poor grades or behavior problems
- More attention-seeking or clinginess
- Frequent mood changes
- A high level of anxiety
- Nightmares or a hard time sleeping
- A return of outgrown behaviors (for example, bed-wetting or thumb-sucking)
- Increased anger or acting out
- Physical symptoms such as headaches or stomach pains

Understanding that these feelings and problems are common when a parent or loved one is diagnosed with cancer will help ease some of your worries. Again, the best way you can help your child is to listen, offer comfort, and as always, provide your child with a lot of support and love.

Knowing When to Ask for Help

While many of the signs of stress mentioned here are to be expected, sometimes kids experience distress beyond what they can manage. Pay attention to how long the behaviors last and how much they affect your child at home and at school.

If it seems that the stress is lasting more than a couple of weeks or if it seems severe, you may want to ask for help. Professionals such as Huntsman Cancer Institute’s Patient and Family Support staff, school counselors, or your child’s pediatrician are good people to turn to. You may also want to find a support group for your child so he or she can meet other kids facing similar challenges and learn new skills to help cope.

Huntsman Cancer Institute’s Patient and Family Support team is a resource for people and families experiencing issues related to a cancer diagnosis.

Our team is available Monday-Friday from 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m.
To learn more or make an appointment, call 801-585-9755.
www.huntsmancancer.org/pfs