

Conversations About Cancer – How Do I Say?

For younger children (children who cannot understand the concept of cells and cell division):

I have a spot of sickness in my body that does not belong there. It was making me feel sick (or - It was making my body not work the right way). We cannot see the spot with our eyes, but the doctors can see it when they take special x-ray pictures. The spot of sickness is called cancer. If you hear us saying “cancer,” we are talking about that spot of sickness. I will be getting a special medicine called chemotherapy to try to make the cancer go away. (Share more details about the specific treatment plan, observable side effects and how those might impact the family’s life.)

For older children (children or teens who understand cells and cell division or who are able to learn about this process) you can add more detail:

The human body is made up of trillions of tiny cells. Healthy cells are formed the right way and divide and multiply at the right speed. Healthy cells divide in an orderly and organized manner and do the jobs they are supposed to do for the body. Healthy cells know when to stop dividing and they know when they are no longer needed and can die off.

Sometimes a change takes place in one healthy cell. This cell is no longer formed the right way and does not do the job it is supposed to do for the body. This is called a cancer cell. When this cancer cell divides and multiplies it makes more cancer cells. Cancer cells divide too quickly. And they do not divide in an orderly and organized way. Cancer cells do not know when to die off and they can invade other areas of the body. Soon there are too many cancer cells and they take over the healthy cells. The healthy cells can’t do the jobs they need to do for the body. If these cancer cells divide and stick together in a lump, it is called a tumor or mass. The cancer cells can make a person feel sick, or they can make changes in the way a person’s body works. I will be getting treatments called chemotherapy and radiation therapy to try to make the cancer go away. (Share more details about the specific treatment plan, observable side effects and how those might impact the family’s life.)

Are you going to die?

Many children wonder about the possibility of death when they learn that a parent or family member has cancer. How these questions might be answered will depend on many things, including how serious the cancer is at the time a parent talks with their children, the ages of the children and how they perceive time, and the patient’s own understanding of or belief about the prognosis. Below are 3 examples of how a parent might answer their questions.



- *Cancer can be a serious illness. And some people do die from cancer. But many people live years and years and even a whole lifetime after they have had cancer. I am not dying now. I am taking my medicines and working hard with my doctors to try to keep the cancer from growing some more or coming back. I will go for check-ups with my doctors often. My doctors will always tell me how I am doing and I will always tell you how my check-ups go. I will always tell you the truth. If you are ever worried, you can always ask me questions and I will tell you what I know.*
- *Some cancers go away completely with treatment. And some cancers the doctors believe a person will have for the rest of their life. My doctor has realized that I will likely have cancer for the rest of my life and I will always need to take medicine for it. We will use the medicines to keep the cancer as small as we can for as long as we can. And the doctors will use medicines to help me feel as well as I can. My doctors will always tell me how I am doing and I will always tell you how my check-ups are going. I will always tell you the truth. If you are ever worried, you can always ask me questions and I will tell you what I know.*
- *Everyone dies from something one day and it is likely that cancer is what I will die from one day. I don't expect that to happen soon. For now, the doctors are going to help me live as long as I can and to help me feel as well as I can. And I will always tell you the truth about how my check-ups go. If you are ever worried, you can always ask me questions and I will tell you what I know.*

For a patient who is nearing the end-of-life it is best if the family gets direct support from a licensed mental health professional or cancer center support staff for guidance. Recommendations regarding the content and timing of conversations with the children should be made based on knowledge of the individual family's medical situation, social situation, ages of the children, and so on.