

For Teens Who Have a Parent with Cancer

If a parent, grandparent or another adult in your life has cancer, this brochure is for you.

Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center
Department of Social Work

▶ What is Cancer?

- ▶ Cancer is a group of different diseases, all involving cells in our bodies that have grown in ways they are not supposed to.
- ▶ Your parent's cancer is **not** contagious. You cannot catch cancer from another person the way you catch a cold.
- ▶ We still don't know what causes cancer. What's important to remember is that cancer is not the fault of something you or anyone else did.
- ▶ Each type of cancer is different, and even the same type of cancer can act differently in different people.



Three of the more common ways to treat cancer are surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy. Not everyone with cancer receives the same treatment.

Surgery: An operation to remove the cancerous tumor (a mass of cancer cells) from the body.

Chemotherapy: A general term that refers to special medicine used to destroy the cancer. There are many different kinds of chemotherapy medicines.

Radiation therapy: The use of invisible rays aimed at cancer cells to kill them.

If you have a parent or close adult in your life with cancer, you may be feeling many different things right now:

- ▶ You may be shocked or scared.
- ▶ You may have questions and wonder what is going to happen.
- ▶ You may be worried or feel sad, lonely or neglected.
- ▶ You may be angry.
- ▶ Or, perhaps you're feeling nothing at all.

Remember that there is no wrong or right way to feel when a parent or close adult has cancer. The feelings listed above, and many others, are normal reactions for a teen who has a parent with cancer.

Even if your parent is telling you about his or her medical treatments, some of the information you hear may be confusing. It's okay to talk about your questions with your parent or someone on your parent's medical team, like a doctor, nurse, or social worker.

▶ What You Might Experience

While your parent is getting medical treatment, you might notice that they have less energy than usual. They may be tired, and may not feel well (kind of like when you have the flu). You might see them lose their hair. They might gain or lose weight. These are all common things that can happen from cancer treatment.

Seeing your parent get sick can be scary. You might worry that your parent is going to get sicker or even die from cancer. It's okay to think about these things. But remember, many people get cancer, have treatment, and do well. Let your parents know about your concerns and questions. Sometimes our fears can be worse than the reality.

▶ Feeling Different

It may feel unfair that you have to go through this difficult time right now. You may feel like nobody else you know has gone through something like this. Your friends may not understand or know what to say. You may, at times, even feel embarrassed or worry about what they're thinking. Try to remember that you won't feel like this forever. You may want to choose one or two close friends to talk with about what's going on.



► What You Can Do to Help

You might be annoyed or angry that you're needed more around the house right now. That's understandable. Or you may feel better when you're spending time with your family or helping out around the house. Going to the movies or watching TV together can be nice ways of spending time with your parent. Everybody's different.

► Getting Help from Others

You may worry about letting your parents see how you feel. They are dealing with a lot, and you might think that your feelings will add to their load. However, it's important to talk about what you are feeling (even the parts about being angry and scared). Let your mom or dad know how you are doing with things that are going on at home. It will actually help them to have this chance to talk with you.

Some teens say they feel very angry or very sad a lot of the time, and they are not sure how or when they will start to feel better. If this sounds like you, it's important to let someone know. You may find it helpful to talk to an adult whom you trust or to a counselor. Talking with a counselor does not mean you are crazy. But it can help by giving you a place to vent your feelings so you can start to feel more like yourself again.

At the hospital we have nurses and social workers who can speak with you. Your parent's medical team wants to support you, too.

► Taking Care of Yourself

Remember to take care of yourself, too. Keep up your routine as much as you can, including school, friends, and activities you enjoy. You may feel funny going about your life and having fun when your parent is home sick or in the hospital. But living your life does not mean you don't care. You can still be concerned about your parent while staying connected with friends and activities.

If you have any questions or want to talk to someone, MSKCC has a program for you. The Kids Express Program can help you learn more about cancer and help you to deal with the changes that you may be facing. It can also help adult cancer patients talk with their children about their illness. We offer consultations, counseling, and educational material for patients and families. You can also contact the Kids Express Program for a list of books and other resources that might be helpful for you during this time.

Kids Express Program – 212-639-7029

Websites

KidsKonnected.org/teens

GildasClub.org



Memorial Sloan-Kettering
Cancer Center

©2010 Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center
1275 York Avenue, New York, New York 10065



C-780