



# When Someone You Know Has Cancer

Finding out that someone you know has cancer can be difficult. You may have many questions, both about cancer itself and about how you should talk to and act around this person. If you're very close to the person with cancer, this can be a frightening and stressful time for you, too.

Here, we will try to answer some of your questions about cancer. We will also share some ideas about how you can show your concern and offer your help to someone with cancer.

## General questions and answers about cancer

### What is cancer?

The body is made up of trillions of living cells. Normal body cells grow, divide into new cells, and die in an orderly way. During the early years of a person's life, normal cells divide faster to allow the person to grow. After the person becomes an adult, most cells divide only to replace worn-out or dying cells or to repair injuries.

Cancer starts when cells in a part of the body start to grow out of control. There are many kinds of cancer, but they all start because of out-of-control growth of abnormal cells.

Cancer cell growth is different from normal cell growth. Instead of dying, cancer cells continue to grow and form new, abnormal cells. Cancer cells can also invade (grow into) other tissues, something that normal cells can't do. Growing out of control and invading other tissues are what makes a cell a cancer cell.

Cells become cancer cells because of damage to DNA. DNA is in every cell and directs all its actions. In a normal cell, when DNA gets damaged the cell either repairs the damage or dies. In cancer cells, the damaged DNA is not repaired, but the cell doesn't die like it should. Instead, this cell goes on making new cells that the body doesn't need. These new cells will all have the same damaged DNA as the first cell does.

People can inherit damaged DNA, but most DNA damage is caused by mistakes that happen while the normal cell is reproducing or by something in our environment. In most cases, no clear cause is found.

Cancer cells often form a tumor. But some cancers, like leukemias, rarely form tumors. Instead, these cancer cells involve the blood and blood-forming organs and circulate through other tissues where they grow.

Cancer cells often travel to other parts of the body, where they begin to grow and form new tumors that replace normal tissue. This process is called *metastasis* (meh-**tas**-tuh-sis). It happens when the cancer cells get into the bloodstream or lymph vessels of our body.

No matter where a cancer may spread, it's always named for the place where it started. For example, breast cancer that has spread to the liver is still called breast cancer, not liver cancer. Likewise, prostate cancer that has spread to the bone is metastatic prostate cancer, not bone cancer.

Different types of cancer can behave very differently. For example, lung cancer and colon cancer are very different diseases. They grow at different rates and respond to different treatments. That's why people with cancer need treatment that's aimed at their kind of cancer.

Not all tumors are cancer. Tumors that aren't cancer are called *benign* (be-**nine**). Benign tumors can cause problems – they can grow very large and press on healthy organs and tissues. But they can't grow into (invade) other tissues. Because they can't invade, they also can't spread to other parts of the body (metastasize). These tumors are almost never life threatening.

## Is cancer contagious?

No, cancer is not contagious. In the past, people often avoided those who had cancer. They were afraid of all kinds of diseases, and didn't know enough about illness to understand that they were in no danger. Even today, families, friends, and co-workers of people with cancer sometimes shy away from them when they learn about the disease. As a result, people with cancer often say they feel isolated and alone. You don't have to stay away from someone with cancer – you cannot catch it from them. In fact, that person could probably use your company more than ever.

## Is cancer caused by stress?

Many studies have looked for a link between personality, stress, and cancer. Careful reviews of scientific evidence do not show that someone's personality can increase their cancer risk. Study findings do not always agree, but the feeling of being stressed does not appear to be a strong predictor of cancer. Major life stressors, such as divorce or the death of a loved one, may raise cancer risk slightly. Also, poverty is linked to higher cancer risk, but this may be more related to health behaviors and poor access to medical care

more than to poverty itself. Of interest, many studies have shown that people who are socially isolated are more likely to die of all causes, including cancer.

We do know that social support and practical help improve the quality of life of people with cancer, and in some cases prolong survival. These things also help people with cancer cope better with their diagnosis, treatment, and recovery. If someone you know has cancer, offering your help and emotional support is a key step toward helping that person manage the effects of their cancer.

## Does cancer always cause pain?

Pain is one of the main reasons people fear cancer. If someone you know has cancer, it's normal to be worried about seeing him or her in pain. But there are some cancers which cause no physical pain at all. When a person with cancer does have pain it can be caused by a number of things. Some people have pain because of the growth of a tumor or as a result of advanced cancer, while others may have pain from surgery or the side effects of treatment.

You should also know that the cancer care team can treat and manage almost any kind of pain. A great deal of progress has been made in pain control, so pain can be reduced or relieved in almost all cases. Even patients with advanced disease can be kept comfortable.

You may also be concerned that someone taking pain medicine for cancer will become addicted to it. But the evidence shows that, in general, people who take prescribed drugs for cancer pain according to the doctor's directions do not become addicted. For more on this, please see *Guide to Controlling Cancer Pain*.

## Do you always die if you have cancer?

No, but this idea is the major reason people fear cancer. The most recent available data shows that about 68% of people diagnosed with cancer are still alive 5 years later. Among those who are not cured of cancer, many can go on living for some years, even though there will be changes in their lives. For these people, cancer can be a lot like diabetes or heart disease – a chronic illness that's mostly controlled with treatment.

If someone you know has cancer, it's important for you to know that cancer is not a death sentence. If you believe they are beyond hope or help, you might not offer them your support. The truth is they may be living with a disease that can be treated or controlled. Keep in mind that cancer is often treatable, and even curable. This will help you focus on supporting the person as they learn to live with cancer. So remember the good news: there are nearly 14 million Americans alive today who have had cancer, and the survival rate is improving all the time.

## What are the different types of cancer treatment?

If someone you know is being treated for cancer, you may want to learn more about what they're going through. Surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation are the most common types of cancer treatment.

Surgery is often the first treatment option if the tumor can be taken out of the body. Sometimes only part of the tumor can be removed. Radiation, chemotherapy, or both might be used to shrink the tumor before or after surgery. For more on this, please see our document called *A Guide to Cancer Surgery*.

Doctors use chemotherapy (or "chemo") to kill cancer cells. The term chemotherapy refers to the use of drugs to kill cancer cells. Usually, the drugs are given into a vein (or IV) or they're taken by mouth. Chemo drugs then travel through the body in the bloodstream, reaching cancer cells that may have spread (metastasized) from the tumor to other places in the body. For more about this, please see *A Guide to Chemotherapy*.

Radiation therapy uses high energy rays (like x-rays) to kill cancer cells and shrink tumors. The radiation may come from outside the body (external radiation) or from radioactive materials put right into the tumor (internal or implant radiation). Getting external radiation is much like getting an x-ray. The radiation itself is painless, but tissue damage may cause side effects. For more information, please *Understanding Radiation Therapy: A Guide for Patients and Families*.

Other kinds of treatment you might hear about include hormone therapy, stem cell or bone marrow transplant, immunotherapy, and targeted therapy. Hormone therapy is sometimes used to treat certain kinds of prostate and breast cancers. Immunotherapy is treatment designed to boost the cancer patient's own immune system to help fight the cancer. Targeted therapy is treatment that targets the cancer cells and causes less damage to healthy cells. Please call us or visit our website if you would like to learn more about these types of cancer treatment.

You might know someone else being treated for the same type of cancer, but don't assume that any two people will respond to treatment the same way. Each cancer is different, and each person's response to treatment is unique. It's best not to compare one person to another.

## What are the side effects of cancer treatment?

The type of treatment a person gets depends on the cancer type and stage (how far the cancer has spread), the age of the patient, and other medical problems and treatments the person has had. Each drug or treatment plan has different side effects. It's hard to predict what side effects will occur, even when patients get the same treatment. Some effects can be bad and others fairly mild. Some people have a tough time with cancer treatment, but there are also many who manage quite well and are even able to work throughout treatment.

## **Chemotherapy side effects**

Short-term (and often treatable) side effects of chemo can include nausea and vomiting, loss of appetite, hair loss, and mouth sores. Because chemo can damage the blood-producing cells of the bone marrow, patients may have low blood cell counts. Low blood counts can cause certain side effects, such as:

- Higher risk of infection (from a shortage of white blood cells)
- Serious bleeding or bruising after cuts or injuries (from a shortage of blood platelets)
- Extreme tiredness or fatigue (sometimes from low red blood cell counts)

Cancer care teams carefully watch for and manage chemo side effects.

Because everyone's body is different, people notice different effects from chemo. Most chemo side effects go away after treatment ends. For instance, hair lost during treatment nearly always grows back after treatment. In the meantime, most patients are able to use wigs, scarves, or hats to cover, warm, or protect their heads.

## **Radiation therapy side effects**

Radiation treatments are much like x-rays and are not painful. The most common side effects are skin irritation and severe tiredness (fatigue). Fatigue is especially common when treatments go on for several weeks. It's a feeling of extreme tiredness and low energy, which often does not get better with rest. People also report fatigue caused by the daily trips to the hospital to get their radiation treatments.

Many people are able to keep up their normal activities throughout the course radiation treatments, though it's common for them to adjust their schedules or need more rest until they feel better.

## **Is cancer treatment worse than cancer?**

This is a common myth that can shorten lives. People who believe that cancer treatment is worse than cancer itself might not follow through with treatments that can prolong life or even cure their cancer.

It's easy to understand the source of this myth. Often people diagnosed with cancer have never had any symptoms or pain. For others, the symptoms have just started and are not too bad yet. But once the treatment starts, they often begin to feel pretty sick. It's true that chemo, radiation, and surgery can cause distressing and sometimes serious side effects. But most of them can be treated and will go away after treatment ends, and cancer treatment can be life-saving. If cancer is not treated at all, symptoms tend to become worse and worse.

There are times when every cancer patient questions their commitment to the difficult journey of treatment and its side effects. Sometimes they can get discouraged by the uncertainty of treatment and wonder if it's worth it. This is normal. It may help to

remember that every year cancer treatments get more and more effective, and doctors keep learning better ways to control treatment side effects.

## **What to expect when someone you know has cancer**

### **Will the person with cancer have physical changes?**

There are some common physical changes shared by many people with cancer. The cancer itself causes some of these changes and others are the result of side effects of cancer treatment. Keep in mind that each cancer journey is different. The person with cancer may or may not have any of the following:

- Hair loss, including eyebrows and eyelashes
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Appetite loss or increase
- Changes in how things taste or smell
- Extreme tiredness called fatigue (more information follows)
- Pale skin and lips, or changes in skin color
- Disfigurement (for example, the loss of a limb or a breast after cancer surgery)
- Nausea and vomiting
- Problems with sleep
- Poor concentration (sometimes called chemo brain)

For many people with cancer, the hardest side effect to deal with is fatigue. People report that fatigue can be overwhelming, and they are surprised at how tired they can feel long after treatment ends. It can take a long time to heal after surgery, and people can feel tired for months after an operation. Chemotherapy can involve many weeks of strong medicines that worsen fatigue as the body heals. People getting radiation treatment also report extreme fatigue. The person with cancer may also experience stress and emotional concerns, which add to exhaustion. Fatigue can go on for many months after treatment is over.

### **How will the person's emotions be affected?**

Each person reacts in their own way to cancer and its treatment. It's normal to feel sad and grieve over the changes that a cancer diagnosis brings. The person's emotions and

mood can change from day to day, even from hour to hour. This is normal. A person with cancer may go through any or all of the following emotions and thoughts:

- Uncertainty
- Anger
- A sense of lack of control
- Sadness
- Fear
- Frustration
- Guilt
- Mood swings
- Much stronger and more intense feelings
- A sense of being disconnected or isolated from others
- Loneliness
- Resentment
- Grief

Over time, the person may discover some changes that are good:

- A greater sense of resilience or strength
- Peace, or a feeling of being at ease
- A clearer idea of their priorities in life
- More appreciation for their quality of life and the people they care about

Cancer can be very unpredictable. Someone with cancer can feel good one day and terrible the next. Expect that your friend or family member will have good days and bad days. Learning to live with uncertainty is part of learning to live with cancer, both for the patient and for the people around them.

There may be times when the uncertainty and fear cause the person with cancer to seem angry, depressed, or withdrawn. This is normal and is a part of the process of grieving what was lost to the cancer (things like health, energy, time). Over time, most people are able to adjust to the new reality in their lives and go forward. Some may need extra help from a support group or a mental health professional to learn to deal with the changes cancer has brought into their lives. For more on this, please see *Anxiety, Fear, and Depression*. You can read it online at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org), or call us for a copy.

## How do people cope with cancer?

People develop all kinds of coping styles during their lives. Some people are quite private, while others are more open and talk about their feelings. These coping styles help people manage difficult personal situations, although some styles work better than others.

Some people use humor and find it to be a relief from the serious nature of the illness. But some may become withdrawn and isolated from family and friends. A cancer diagnosis creates a lot of change. People often try to maintain as much control as they can in order to feel more secure. Some people become very angry or sad. They might be grieving the loss of their own healthy self-image, or the loss of control over their own lives.

Some people find it helps to simply be hopeful and do what they can to maintain that hope. Hope means different things to different people. And people can hope for many things while facing cancer.

You might assume that someone who is positive and optimistic must be denying the fact that they have cancer. If the person with cancer seems upbeat and unaffected by having cancer, don't assume they're in denial. Making the most of every day may simply be their way of coping. As long as they are getting medical care, they're probably not in denial, and their way of coping with cancer should be respected. For more information, please see *Coping With Cancer in Everyday Life*.

## Ways to respond when someone you know has cancer

### What should I say to the person who has cancer?

You're not alone if you don't know what to say to someone who has cancer. You might not know the person very well, or you may have a close relationship. The most important thing you can do is mention the situation in some way that feels comfortable for you. You can show interest and concern, you can express encouragement, and/or you can offer support. Sometimes the simplest expressions of concern are the most meaningful. And sometimes just listening is the most helpful thing you can do.

Respond from your heart! Here are some ideas:

- "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care."
- "I'm sorry to hear that you are going through this."
- "How are you doing?"
- "If you would like to talk about it, I'm here."
- "Please let me know how I can help."

- “I’ll keep you in my thoughts.”

While it’s good to be encouraging, it’s also important not to show false optimism or tell the person with cancer to always stay positive. Doing these things might seem to discount their very real fears, concerns, or sad feelings. It’s also tempting to say that you know how the person feels. But while you may know this is a trying time, no one can know exactly how any person with cancer feels.

Using humor can be an important way of coping. It can also be another approach to support and encouragement. Let the person with cancer take the lead; it’s healthy if they find something funny about a side effect, like hair loss or increased appetite, and you can certainly join them in a good laugh. This can be a great way to relieve stress and take a break from the more serious nature of the situation. But you never want to joke unless you know the person with cancer can handle it and appreciate the humor.

When the person with cancer looks good, let them know! Avoid making comments when their appearance isn’t as good, such as “You’re looking pale,” or “You’ve lost weight.” It’s very likely that they’re acutely aware of it, and they may feel embarrassed if people comment on it.

It’s usually best not to share stories about family members or friends who have had cancer. Everyone is different, and these stories may not be helpful. Instead, it’s OK to let them know that you are familiar with cancer because you’ve been through it with someone else. Then they can pick up the conversation from there.

## What about confidentiality?

Respecting privacy is very important. If someone tells you that they have cancer, you should never tell anyone else unless they have given you permission. Let them be the one to tell others. If someone else asks you about it, you can say something like, “It’s not up to me to discuss this, but I’m sure Ann will appreciate your concern. I’ll let her know you asked about her.”

It might feel awkward if you hear “through the grapevine” that someone has cancer. You could ask the person who told you if it’s public information. If it’s not, you probably shouldn’t say anything to the person with cancer. But if it is public information, don’t ignore it. You might say, in a caring way, “I heard what’s happening, and I’m sorry.”

You may feel angry or hurt if someone who’s close to you didn’t share the news of a cancer diagnosis with you right away. No matter how close you are, it may take time for the person to adjust to the diagnosis and be ready to tell others. Don’t take it personally. Focus on how you can support that person now that you know. For more about this, please see our document called *After Diagnosis: A Guide for Patients and Families*.

## How do I overcome feeling uncomfortable when I'm around the person who has cancer?

Feeling sorry for them, or feeling guilty for being healthy yourself, are normal responses. But by turning those feelings into offerings of support you make the feelings useful. Asking how you can help can take away some of the awkwardness. Cancer is a scary disease. It can create a great deal of uneasiness for people who don't have experience dealing with it. Don't be ashamed of your own fears or discomfort. Be honest with the person about how you feel. You might find that talking about it is easier than you think.

Remember to take care of yourself. If you are close in age to the person with cancer or if you are very fond of them, you may find that this experience creates anxiety for you. Cancer often reminds us of our own mortality. You might notice feelings somewhat like those of the person who has cancer: disbelief, sadness, uncertainty, anger, sleeplessness, and fears about your own health. If this is the case, you may want to get support for yourself from a mental health professional or a local support group. If your company has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), you can contact a counselor that way. You can also use other sources of counseling, such as your health insurance or religious support services.

## A list of basic do's and don'ts when someone you know has cancer

### Do:

- Take your cues from the person with cancer. Some people are very private while others will openly talk about their illness. Respect the person's need to share or their need for privacy.
- Let them know you care.
- Respect their decisions about how their cancer will be treated, even if you disagree.
- Include the person in usual plans and social events. Let them be the one to tell you if the commitment is too much to manage.
- Listen without always feeling that you have to respond. Sometimes a caring listener is what the person needs the most.
- Expect the person with cancer to have good days and bad days, emotionally and physically.
- Keep your relationship as normal and balanced as possible. While greater patience and compassion are called for during times like these, your friend should continue to respect your feelings, as you respect their feelings.

- Offer to help in concrete, specific ways.

## Don't:

- Offer advice they don't ask for, or be judgmental.
- Feel you must put up with serious displays of temper or mood swings. You shouldn't accept disruptive or abusive behavior just because someone is ill.
- Take things too personally. It's normal for the person with cancer to be quieter than usual, to need time alone, and to be angry at times.
- Be afraid to talk about the illness.
- Always feel you have to talk about cancer. The person with cancer may enjoy conversations that don't involve the illness.
- Be afraid to hug or touch your friend if that was a part of your friendship before the illness.
- Be patronizing. (Try not to use a "How sick are you today?" tone when asking how the person is doing.)
- Tell the person with cancer, "I can imagine how you must feel," because you really can't.

## Offering support to someone with cancer

### How can I be supportive?

Remember that the person you know with cancer may find it hard to ask for help or seem weak or vulnerable. Telling a person, "You're so brave," or "You're so strong," can put pressure on them to act strong when they may not feel up to it. Families can put subtle pressure on people with cancer by expecting or needing them to be strong all the time. In that case, you might play an important role for a friend who has cancer. They may know you well and trust you enough to confide in you, yet you don't have the emotional attachment and expectations of a family member. This kind of relationship can be a great gift for a person facing cancer.

It's human nature to distance yourself from someone when they become ill. Cancer can force us to look at our own fears about illness, weakness, or death. This may make us reluctant to interact with the affected person. But isolation can be a problem for people with cancer. Make an extra effort to reach out.

If your friend needs medical equipment or money for treatment, you can look into getting something donated or organize a raffle to help raise money. Or you can simply take up a collection to buy something that might not be covered by insurance.

The person with cancer may look to you for advice regarding financial worries, work issues, or other concerns. Be honest. Help if you can, but if you feel uncomfortable, say so. There are many places a person can get help and support, and you might suggest seeking the advice of a professional who is best suited to give that kind of guidance.

Keep in mind, too, that those close to the person with cancer will also need help and support. A family member who is responsible for the care of the person with cancer can become isolated and stressed. If you know that person, you may want to check in to see how they are doing, too. They might also be able to share ideas about how you can best help the person with cancer.

## What are some concrete ways I can help?

Communication is the key. Continue to treat your friend as normally as possible. Talk about how they're managing and what they need. But don't feel that you always have to talk about cancer. Include them in activities and social events. If they aren't up to doing something, let them be the one to decide to say no. Keep inviting them unless they tell you otherwise.

Ask what they could use; let them tell you what would be most helpful. Offer to help in specific ways, rather than saying, "Call me if I can help." Here are some ideas:

- Send or prepare a meal. Arrange a schedule of meal delivery.
- Offer to help with child care. Arrange a schedule of day care pick-ups.
- Offer a ride to and from treatment appointments.
- Help run errands.
- Offer to take phone calls if your friend is feeling tired and needs to rest.
- Coordinate visits by groups, or coordinate sending cards, flowers, or gifts.
- Honor your friend by making contributions to related charities, organizing blood drives, or making special efforts in their name.
- Offer to do some research on their unanswered questions about cancer, or refer them to the American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345.
- If the person agrees, plan a party when treatment is finished or on anniversary dates. Always check with the person with cancer before making party plans, including showing them the list of those to be invited.

## What if the person's cancer comes back?

In some cases, the cancer will come back (recur) and treatment will begin again. The person with cancer may or may not react in the same way they did the first time. Again, communication is key. Many people are quite upset when they learn the cancer is back.

They may feel they don't have the emotional or physical reserves to fight again. Others seem to accept a recurrence more easily. They may have expected it, or are simply ready, for whatever reasons, to fight again. By equipping yourself with the knowledge of how best to talk to the person with cancer, you can be most helpful to them.

## To learn more

### More information from your American Cancer Society

We have a lot more information that you might find helpful. Explore [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org) or call our National Cancer Information Center toll-free number, 1-800-227-2345. We're here to help you any time, day or night.

### National organizations and websites\*

Along with the American Cancer Society, other sources of information and support include:

#### **National Cancer Institute**

Toll-free number: 1-800-422-6237

TTY: 1-800-332-8615

Website: [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

Offers information about cancer and issues affecting the lives of cancer patients and their families

*\*Inclusion on this list does not imply endorsement by the American Cancer Society*

No matter who you are, we can help. Contact us anytime, day or night, for information and support. Call us at **1-800-227-2345** or visit [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).

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