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Telling Others About Your Cancer

Finding out you have cancer can be overwhelming for you as well as friends and family. People often don't know what to say. They may feel sad and uncomfortable and might be afraid of upsetting you. They might be frightened about the possibility of losing you. Sometimes people find it easier to say nothing because they're afraid of saying the wrong thing. Some people find it easy to talk, while others may become overly careful or act too cheerful.

How do you feel about it?

You most likely will have many different emotions as you learn more about your diagnosis and begin to learn about [treatment options](#)¹. It's normal to wonder, "Why me?" or to feel sad, angry, or afraid. Physical and chemical changes from the treatment or the cancer itself can also affect your emotions. The first step is to admit to yourself how you feel. It's OK to let yourself feel the way you do.

Getting ready to talk to others

Only you can decide when to tell your friends and family you have cancer. People are very sobered by the news that someone has cancer. Most people need and want to talk to someone when they find themselves in this kind of situation. It may be even more important for single people without supportive family members nearby to let close friends know what's happening. Think ahead so you can tell them what they can do when they ask how they can help – people who live alone often have a few extra needs compared to those who live with others.

Sometimes, telling those closest to you helps you take in the reality of what's happening. Some people find that by talking, they begin to solve problems and think about other issues as their family and friends ask questions.

Think about how much you want to share. You might want to explain what kind of cancer you have, which treatments you might need, and your outlook (or prognosis). As you talk with others, you may want to write down the questions that come up so that you can discuss them with your [cancer care team](#)².

Deciding who to tell

It could be helpful to start by making a list of people that you want to talk to in person. Then you can make another list of friends that you socialize with less often and have another friend or family member contact them with the news.

People usually tell their spouse or partner first, then other family and close friends. It's also important to tell your children, which might require more preparation depending on their ages. Learn more in [Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer: Dealing With Diagnosis](#)³.

If you work, think about whether you want to let your co-workers know what's going on and how much they need to know. Co-workers and acquaintances often find out later, although sometimes you'll need to tell a supervisor or someone in Human Resources that you have a medical problem if you'll need to take time off. Different people require different levels of information.

If you do decide to tell co-workers, you can start by talking with and getting ideas from someone you trust at work. Some people tell co-workers in a group via a carefully planned email or brief statement in a meeting, so that everyone starts with a basic understanding of what's happening. There is no one right answer for everyone – it depends on your preferences and the culture at your workplace. For more on this, see [Working During Cancer Treatment](#)⁴.

How to talk to others about your cancer

In general, tell the people close to you how you're feeling. This is sometimes hard to do, but it's healthy to let others know about your sadness, anxiety, anger, or other emotional distress. If you don't feel comfortable doing this, you may want to [find a support group](#)⁵ or a mental health counselor to help you. Your support group or counselor will be there for you at a regular time set aside for you to focus on and talk about your concerns and issues. Some people prefer workshops, peer groups, or religious support.

Find what works for you

Try different things until you find what works for you. When you keep other people involved and informed about your illness, it helps ease your burden. Friends and family can share their strength and concern with you and with each other, which can be helpful for everyone involved.

“I could not do this without my support group. They’re going through this with me and we understand each other in ways that no one else can. My family tries to understand how I feel, but my support group friends *know* how I feel – they’re fighting cancer, too.” Lee, age 56

If you or your family normally don’t like to talk about certain personal issues, remember that it’s OK not to open up to everyone. Some people are very careful about who they talk with and what they talk about. This might be a good time, though, for you to start to work on becoming more open with trusted loved ones.

Giving details

It could get tiring telling a lot of people details about your illness over and over again. You can always suggest that they call or visit our website to learn more for themselves, or to find out how they can best help you.

“I said I was going to get cards printed up saying what kind of cancer I had and what treatment I needed. I know people cared, but I got sick and tired of repeating the same story every time someone asked...” Van, age 26

There are also special websites such as [CaringBridge⁶](#) designed for cancer patients and families to help them keep friends and family updated without having to talk on the phone for hours about what’s going on. These sites typically let you decide who’s able to see your updates – you can make them public, or limit access to only the people you invite. If you’re unable to set it up yourself, ask for help from a trusted friend or family member who knows about these kinds of sites and tools. Some people send group emails, text messages, or tweets to let friends know when there are changes or updates. Some websites will even send out emails or texts for you. This can save many phone calls and yet keep the information coming for the caring or even the just curious.

Learn your “trigger” points

Think about your “trigger points” or topics that are too sensitive for you to talk about yet. Do you get angry when people question your choice of treatments? Maybe this is a topic you’ll have to avoid. Does it annoy you when people bring religion into it, saying things like, “God never gives you more than you can handle?” Think about the things

that people have said or could say that bother you. Then, plan a response that's comfortable for you and cuts off the conversation. And once you've shared what you wish to share, be prepared to change to another topic. Maybe you can say something like "I really get tired of talking about cancer. Let's talk about something else."

Ask how they feel about it

Try to encourage loved ones to talk to you about how they're feeling so you can work through questions together. You can say, "How are **you** doing? Can you believe this?" This gives your friend or family member permission to talk with you about their feelings. But if you're not ready to hear about their fears and worries, don't ask. It can be tough enough to manage your treatment and figure out how you feel without worrying about others. It takes effort and emotional work that you may not have the energy for. But if you want to foster openness, this is one way to do so.

Sometimes you may **not** want to talk about how you feel or about how others feel. You can gently tell others this just by saying something like, "You know, usually I am OK talking about things like this, but today I just can't handle it. I'm sure you understand." This way you set your own boundaries about when and under what circumstances you are able to discuss your illness.

When others want to help

One of the first things a friend or family member often says is "What can I do to help?" You might be tempted to say, "Oh, nothing right now. We're just fine." Maybe you don't really know what you need, want your privacy, or feel you have all you can handle without having more people around you. Remember that most people really do want to help, and you'll probably need extra help at some point during your cancer treatment.

Be as specific as possible about the kind of help you need. For example, tell them when you need a ride to the doctor, or find out if they might be able to help with housecleaning, yard work, or child care. There will be times when you don't know what you need, but even just saying that will be helpful. It also gives them a chance to offer something they can do for you.

When people say unhelpful things

Tell you to cheer up

You may have friends or family members who tell you to "cheer up" when you talk to

them about your sadness, worries, or fears. It's OK to ask them gently if they'd be willing just to listen, without judgment or giving advice (unless you ask for it). It's important for your mental health that you find someone you can talk to. Don't allow yourself to be discouraged by people who are uncomfortable with your feelings. Some people are unable to listen, not because of you, but because of their own experiences or their own sadness. That has nothing to do with you. You may have to accept that this person may not be the best one for you to talk to. Look for others who can handle it better.

Ask questions you don't want to answer

You may find that sometimes you are pressed to answer questions about your cancer when you don't feel like it. To avoid this, you might want to ask a family member or friend to be your spokesperson. It can be emotionally exhausting to repeat the details of your illness to everyone who's concerned about you. Having a spokesperson keeps you from having to do this, but keeps loved ones up to date without wearing you out.

In some cases, your cancer illness may be "big news" in your community. Often, people are truly concerned but really don't know you very well. Of course, there are also people who are just curious.

Cancer is very personal and you need to be comfortable with how much you share with people who just want to know what's happening. You may have to think about ways to tell people that you don't want to talk about your personal business. In many cases, "Thank you for asking, but I'd rather not talk about it right now" is enough to make people understand, but sometimes you may have to be more direct. "I'd prefer not to go into details" or "I don't want to get into my private health issues" may be needed. Think about how you want to handle curious questions from people you don't know. Try to prepare a response that works for you.

"One day a total stranger came up and asked what was wrong with me! I said 'Nothing a little chemo won't fix' and turned away. I know I was rude, but it just got to be so annoying. Some days it was just too much to handle."
Elle, age 62

Bring up cancer unexpectedly

Sometimes people will try to comfort you on a day when you are feeling especially angry. Or a person may come up to you and start talking about your cancer when you're trying to focus on your child's play at school. Maybe someone you barely recognize stops you in the grocery store with the sad story of her father's cancer. You really don't

want to hear their story, but you know they're just trying to be nice or relate to you. How can you stop them politely? Sometimes you just have to take a couple of deep breaths and say calmly, "Thank you so much for your concern, but I need to focus on something else today." Remember, it's always your decision about whether or not you choose to discuss it.

Become impatient or angry with you

Sometimes those close to you may become angry too. Just as you're going through many different emotions, those around you may be going through the same kinds of feelings. Most people will feel angry at some point, but try to keep in mind that family and friends are angry with the situation – **not** with you. You're probably going through exactly the same thing at times.

You may hear, "You aren't doing the things you used to do." Children, and even some adults, can be extremely self-centered. Your social, family, and work roles will change as you begin to focus on treatment and healing. Your energy levels will be low at times and you may not be able to do all that you had been doing. You will adjust more easily if you explain this to those around you and share your reactions to the different changes taking place in your life. Talk to your family about how tasks can still be done even though you won't be able to do all of them yourself.

Keep life as normal as possible

As much as you can, allow yourself and your family members to keep life as normal as possible while you're getting treatment. Encourage your family to keep doing the things they always did without feeling guilty (enjoying hobbies, playing sports, exercising, spending time with friends, and so on). Children, especially, benefit from the routine, but adults also find that it offers them an anchor for day-to-day life.

What not to do

- Don't ignore or neglect a friend or relative who may need to open up and talk with you.
- Don't ignore your own need to talk with someone.
- Don't set up a false front, or a "happy face," if you don't really feel that way. While you might tend to try to protect your loved ones by acting as cheerful as possible, it will help you and them more if you share your true feelings.
- Don't feel that there's a perfect way to talk or handle your interactions with others. You'll find that there are times when you feel great about talking and sharing, and other

times when you feel that communication is not going very well. Realize that you – and others – are doing the best you can most of the time. And that’s good enough.

When to call the doctor

Sometimes you’ll have physical side effects from your treatment that may mean you need help from your cancer care team. Learn more about the physical symptoms and side effects of cancer treatment, and when you should get help with them in the “Treatments” section of our website. Talk to your doctor, nurse, or social worker if you have any concerns that seem too much to manage on your own. Also be sure that you know who to call or how to get help outside of normal office hours and on weekends or holidays.

For some people, having cancer and going through the stress it brings can start to make it seem that life isn’t worthwhile. Please talk to your doctor or nurse right away if you have thoughts about hurting yourself. Cancer and cancer treatment can be hard to get through, and lots of people need extra help and support.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types.html
2. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/choosing-your-treatment-team.html
3. www.cancer.org/treatment/children-and-cancer/when-a-family-member-has-cancer/dealing-with-diagnosis.html
4. www.cancer.org/treatment/survivorship-during-and-after-treatment/coping/working-during-cancer-treatment.html
5. www.cancer.org/support-programs-and-services/resource-search.html
6. www.caringbridge.org/

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