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Treating Children with Cancer

Treatment for childhood cancer is based mainly on the type and stage (extent) of the cancer. The main types of treatment used for childhood cancer are:

- [Surgery](#)¹
- [Radiation therapy](#)²
- [Chemotherapy](#)³ (chemo)

Some types of childhood cancers might be treated with high-dose chemo followed by a [stem cell transplant](#)⁴. And newer types of treatment, such as [targeted therapy drugs](#)⁵ and [immunotherapy](#)⁶, are becoming increasingly important in treating some types of childhood cancer.

Often more than one type of treatment is used

With some exceptions, childhood cancers tend to respond better to certain treatments, such as chemo. This might be because these cancers tend to grow quickly (and chemo works better against fast-growing cancers). Children's bodies are also usually better able to recover from higher doses of chemotherapy than are adults' bodies. Using more intense treatments gives doctors a better chance of treating the cancer effectively, but it can also lead to more short- and long-term side effects.

Unlike chemo, radiation therapy can often cause more serious side effects in children (especially very young children) than in adults, so its use sometimes needs to be limited. Doctors do their best to balance the need for intense treatment with the desire to limit side effects as much as possible.

For detailed information on how a certain type of childhood cancer is treated, see our information on that specific [type of cancer](#)⁷.

The cancer treatment team

Children with cancer and their families have special needs that can best be met at [children's cancer centers](#)⁸. Treatment of childhood cancer in these centers is coordinated by a team of experts who know the differences between adult and childhood cancers, as well as the unique needs of children with cancer and their families. This team usually includes:

- **Pediatric oncologists:** doctors who specialize in using medicines to treat children with cancer
- **Pediatric surgeons:** doctors who specialize in performing surgery in children
- **Radiation oncologists:** doctors who specialize in using radiation to treat cancer
- **Pediatric oncology nurses:** nurses who specialize in caring for children with cancer
- **Nurse practitioners (NPs) and physician assistants (PAs):** nurses and other health professionals who are specially trained and licensed to practice medicine alongside doctors

The team can also include many other health professionals. Children's cancer centers have psychologists, social workers, child life specialists, nutritionists, rehabilitation and physical therapists, and educators who can support and care for the entire family. For more information, see [When Your Child Is Going Through Cancer Treatment](#)⁹.

Getting the best treatment possible

Today, most children with cancer are treated at specialized [children's cancer centers](#)¹⁰. These centers are often members of the Children's Oncology Group (COG). Going to a hospital that specializes in treating childhood cancer helps ensure that a child gets the best available cancer treatment.

These centers offer the most up-to-date-treatment by conducting clinical trials (studies of promising new therapies). Children's cancer centers often have many clinical trials going on at any one time, and in fact most children treated at these centers take part in a clinical trial as part of their treatment.

Clinical trials are one way to get state-of-the-art cancer care for your child. They may be the only way to get access to some newer treatments. They are also the best way for doctors to learn better methods to treat cancer. Still, they might not be right for every child. Talk to your child's cancer care team to learn about possible clinical trials for your child, and ask about the pros and cons of enrolling in one of them.

If your child qualifies for a clinical trial, it's up to you whether or not to enter (enroll) your child into it. Older children, who can understand more, usually must also agree to take part in the clinical trial before the parents' consent is accepted.

See [Clinical Trials](#)¹¹ to learn more.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/surgery.html
2. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/radiation.html
3. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/chemotherapy.html
4. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/stem-cell-transplant.html
5. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/targeted-therapy.html
6. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/immunotherapy.html
7. www.cancer.org/cancer/all-cancer-types.html
8. www.cancer.org/treatment/finding-and-paying-for-treatment/choosing-your-treatment-team/pediatric-cancer-centers.html
9. www.cancer.org/treatment/children-and-cancer/when-your-child-has-cancer/during-treatment.html
10. www.cancer.org/treatment/finding-and-paying-for-treatment/choosing-your-treatment-team/pediatric-cancer-centers.html
11. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/clinical-trials.html

References

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National Cancer Institute. Cancer in Children and Adolescents. 2018. Accessed at <https://www.cancer.gov/types/childhood-cancers/child-adolescent-cancers-fact-sheet> on September 17, 2019.

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