

Talking to children

This information is about [talking to children when an adult has cancer](#). Deciding what to tell children about cancer is difficult. It can be hard to know what to tell them, and you may be worried about upsetting them.

You might feel you are helping to protect children by not telling them. But children often know when something serious is affecting the people they are close to. Not knowing what is happening can make them feel frightened and unsure.

Talking about the cancer can help them feel more secure. It can help them understand what is going on and prepare them for any changes. It may also help with some of your own anxiety too. Not telling them may cause extra stress.

How much you tell children may depend on their age. Younger children may not understand, but they will be aware of changes to their routine. Teenagers or young people usually understand but may find it hard to talk about. Or they may ask you questions about the diagnosis and what it means for family life. They may need time to work through their feelings.

Teenagers may take on more responsibilities to help – perhaps cooking meals or looking after younger children. This can be hard at a time when they may want more freedom and independence.

Sometimes teenagers may find it hard to talk about a cancer diagnosis. Encourage them to talk to someone they trust, who can support and listen to them. This might be a grandparent, family friend, teacher or counsellor. Or they may find support online.

You will know the best way of talking to your children. Being open and honest is usually best. You will know how they might react and what support they may need.

Tips for talking to children

- You will probably need time to cope with your own feelings before you talk to your children.
- If you have more than 1 child, it is best to tell them together. Choose a time and a place when they are most likely to listen, and where you will not be interrupted.
- You could start by asking them what they already know. They may know more than you think.
- It is best to start by giving small amounts of information, and slowly telling them more. Use words they will understand.
- Try asking questions that encourage them to say what they are thinking.
- If you cannot answer all their questions, it is fine to say you do not know. Tell them you will try to find out.
- It may also help to prepare the child for possible physical changes.
- It may help to [tell teachers, nursery staff or other adults](#). You can ask the teachers to tell you if your child shows any behaviour changes. With teenagers, it is usually best to talk to them first.
- If you are worried about how your child is coping, ask your doctor or nurse about support for them from counselling or psychological services.

Macmillan Cancer Support resources

We have more information on our [website](#), including [audiobooks](#). Or you can order our free booklets and leaflets on orders.macmillan.org.uk such as:

- MAC5766 [Talking to children and teenagers when an adult has cancer](#)
- MAC11646 [Talking about cancer](#)

We produce information in a [range of formats](#) and [languages](#). To order these, visit our website or call our support line on **0808 808 00 00**.

Further Macmillan support

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Or visit macmillan.org.uk to [chat online](#) to one of our team.

Deaf or hard of hearing? Call using Relay UK on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the [Relay UK app](#). Speak another language? Telephone interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use.

If you want to share your experiences or ask questions, you can find others who understand on our [Online Community](#). Our free [Macmillan Buddy service](#) can arrange weekly calls or visits with a friendly volunteer who understands what you're going through.

Other useful contact details

- Hope Support Services – visit www.hopesupportservices.org.uk or call **0198 956 6317**
- Youth Access – visit www.youthaccess.org.uk or call **0208 772 9900**
- Maggie's – visit www.maggies.org.uk

Notes and questions
