Should You Tell Your Children You Have Cancer?

A cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming for anyone – and if you’re a parent, it’s often complicated by concerns over whether to tell your children. You may want to keep it from your children to protect them, or you may not want them to see how scared you are. You also may not be sure of the impact that treatment will have on your family member’s lives.

Avoid keeping cancer a secret. Once you have a handle on the extent of your diagnosis, it’s important to be direct and open with your children about what’s happening.

You’ll Help Them Prepare for What’s Ahead

Every family member is affected by a cancer diagnosis, and each person will deal with it differently. When you tell your children what’s going on, it gives them the opportunity to prepare for a potentially significant life change. If treatment will alter your appearance or energy level, or if you’ll be spending time away from home to receive care, they’ll know what to expect. For older children, it helps them come to terms with your diagnosis and ask the questions that are on their minds. Talking to them early on builds trust and makes the imminent changes less frightening. Get more advice on talking to children of different ages.

You’ll Avoid PUTting Others in an Uncomfortable Position

Being honest with your children about cancer means that other adults can be honest, too. Your spouse doesn’t have to cover for you. Nor will other adults in your children’s lives – teachers, grandparents, and neighbors – have to keep a secret. The energy spent making sure that your children don’t learn about your illness can be channeled into more important things, such as helping your kids feel safe and preparing them for the changes ahead.

They’ll Get the Facts From You Rather Than Create Their Own Stories

Most children, even young ones, can sense when something is wrong. When they don’t have the full story, they may make up their own. Avoid this by being proactive. When you’re upfront with your children, you have more control over the narrative. And as their parent, you know how best to communicate with them. You can clear up misconceptions by assuring them that they did not cause your illness and that they can’t “catch” it from you.
They’ll Have the Opportunity to Support You

In situations where children feel helpless, they may want to do something to help. Consider giving older children additional responsibilities or encouraging a younger child to make you a get well card. Depending on the age of the child, they also may be eager to offer emotional support. When they know how to help, it will make them feel like they are part of your journey to recovery. And that may be the biggest benefit to sharing your diagnosis with your children – it can help you develop more meaningful connections with each other.

More Information and Resources
Learn how Support Services at Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center can help you explain your illness to your children.