

How to Prepare Your Child for Your Cancer Surgery

Facing Cancer Together | Family Education & Support



Your cancer surgery has been scheduled. You wonder, do I tell my children? What do I tell them? For most ages, you should prepare your children for your surgery. Good preparation can help children feel less fearful or anxious regarding medical experiences.

STEP 1

PREPARE TO PROVIDE AGE-APPROPRIATE INFORMATION

Make sure *you* are most prepared with the information regarding your surgery. Educate yourself, feel comfortable and make sure all of your own questions are answered prior to preparing your child.

- Help your child(ren) understand *why* the surgery is needed.
- Time the conversations according to age.
 - The older the child, the sooner you can tell them to help them process the information. They need more time to formulate thoughts, feelings and questions.
 - Younger children benefit from a **shorter notice** time-frame. For example, preschool age: you can tell them with at least **two days'** notice.
- Let your children ask questions.
- If possible, tour surgery center prior to surgery.
- Don't expect to be perfect. Often parents hold high expectations for themselves during this process. Talking to children can be tricky and it might feel stressful. However, don't panic. Give yourself a break and know that no parent is perfect, with or without cancer.

Possible Conversation Starters

Toddler to Preschool

"Daddy needs to have surgery in two days. Surgery is also called an operation. He will have his bump removed to help him feel better. When you visit, you can bring him a special present."

“Remember, you can’t ‘catch’ Daddy’s cancer. You also didn’t cause his need to have surgery. So, it’s okay to be close to him when he’s not feeling well.”

School-Age

“I need to have surgery to remove the cancer tumor in my body. I will need to be in the hospital at least ___ days to help me recover. You can help me pack my hospital bag the night before and then come visit and keep me company.”

“You will stay with Grandma and Grandpa when I have surgery in a few weeks. You can draw me a picture that I can take with me.”

Preteen to Teen

“I know my treatment plan now, and it will include surgery to remove the cancer [in the body part where the cancer is]. The surgery is scheduled in two weeks. I’m open to sharing as much information as you would like, depending on your comfort level.”

“If you are up for it, you can certainly come and visit with me after surgery. You can also spend time with your friends, instead. It’s up to you.”

STEP 2

VISITING THE HOSPITAL

You might worry that visiting the hospital will stress out your child, but it can sometimes be worse if they are separated from you and can’t picture where you are. Depending on their own medical experience, your preparation will vary. Simply ask if your child wants to visit you. No need to force the issue if they refuse. Have a plan in place to help the visit go smoothly, if they choose to visit.

- Prepare them for sights and sounds of the hospital environment.
 - IV in your arm, IV pole for medicine, tape/staples, etc.
 - Explain what the beeping noises mean.
- Have a friend or family member bring your child for the visit. This person can be in charge of bringing the child in and out of the room if they feel overwhelmed.
- Allow your child to decide how long they will stay (school-age/preteen/teen). Toddler and preschooler visits should be relatively shorter.
- Encourage your child to bring books, art materials or toys to help keep them occupied.
- Depending on how you feel, you can let your child hug or snuggle with you.
- Prepare them for the possibility that you will likely still need to rest for a while when you are at home.
- After the visit, ask them how they felt about visiting the hospital.

STEP 3

PREPARE FOR VARIED EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

Every age group will have varied responses to the idea and realities of surgery. Your children's own medical experience may impact how they respond. Additionally, age and temperament may influence how they respond. Keep in mind, it's all very normal. If your child has extreme medical anxieties, talk to your local Child Life Specialist to help find ways to normalize their own medical experiences. You can also call Angel Foundation at (612) 627-9000 for additional tips.

Toddler to Preschool

- Your toddler may be fussier than usual if you aren't able to be involved in normal routine.
- You might need to comfort and reassure them more than usual.

School-age

- Your school-age child may regress in response and behaviors, and you might need to comfort and reassure them more than usual.
- Your child might overreact with a simple situation (e.g. their glass of water spilled).

Preteen to Teen

- Your teen may or may not be interested in helping or coming to visit you in the hospital. They may feel more comfortable spending time with friends or family to help themselves process their thoughts and feelings.
- **Validation of this response is most important.** Your teen needs to feel heard.

STEP 4

BALANCE HOPE AND REALITY

Living with uncertainty can be challenging. When talking to children about cancer, it's always best practice to give honest, hopeful answers - even if you don't have all the answers yourself. Additionally, having ongoing home life routines and family traditions will help you and your family strike a balance and give you the day-to-day tools to thrive.

Other tips:

"You don't have to tell anyone about my surgery. But, if you would like to talk to someone, we can help with that."

"The doctor is pretty confident that treatment will help with my prognosis, but if that changes, we'll let you know."