



CANCERcare®

800-813-HOPE (4673)  
info@cancercaare.org  
www.cancercaare.org

CancerCare  
for  
kids®

fact sheet

# MOM OR DAD HAS CANCER... NOW WHAT?

If your mom or dad has been diagnosed with cancer, you may be feeling confused, worried, upset, sad or angry. You probably have many questions. Learning more about cancer and how it may affect your life can help. Here are some answers to questions frequently asked by children and teens just like you.



## WHAT IS CANCER?

Our bodies are made up of trillions of cells. Normally, these cells grow and divide to form new cells and replace old ones. When a person has cancer it means that this cell process is not working properly. This can cause a growth, called a tumor, which may be cancerous. Some types of cancer, such as blood cancers like leukemia or multiple myeloma, do not form a solid tumor.<sup>i</sup>

## What causes cancer?

While we usually do not know what causes cancer, certain factors may make it more likely for a person to get cancer. Some examples are being exposed to a lot of radiation, cancer-causing chemicals, or tobacco.<sup>ii</sup>

## Can I catch it?

Cancer is not contagious. This means that there is no way of catching cancer from another person. Sharing germs, hugging or kissing your parent will not cause their cancer to spread to you.

## What is the treatment for cancer?

The most common types of treatment for cancer are surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. Surgery means that a doctor will remove the cancer from your mom's or dad's body. Chemotherapy is a type of medication that kills cancer cells. Your parent

may go to a medical center to get their treatment through an IV or injection or they may take it in pill form at home. Radiation treatment uses waves, similar to X-rays, which kill cancer cells. Your mom or dad may need one or more types of treatment.

## How will the treatment make my parent feel?

Since the treatment your parent is taking is very strong, so that it can kill the cancer cells, it may also cause other reactions, called side effects. For example, your mom or dad may feel tired or nauseous, or develop a skin rash.

## Why is my parent's hair falling out?

Another side effect of chemotherapy can be hair loss. Chemotherapy attacks the fast growing cancer cells and, since hair follicles also grow very quickly, chemotherapy can cause a person's hair to fall out. While it may feel strange to watch your parent lose their hair, remember that their hair will most likely grow back.

(over)

## **How will my parent's diagnosis affect my life?**

When you first find out about your parent's diagnosis, you may feel shocked. As time goes on, you may feel angry, sad, worried or guilty more than usual. At other times, you may feel just fine. While your mom or dad is going through treatment, he or she may need extra help around the house. For example, your parent may ask you to help with chores more often or to watch your siblings while they rest. If this seems hard for you, talk to them about how you are feeling.

## **How can I manage these changes and my feelings?**

It can be helpful to let your parent know how you are feeling. Talking about your fears and questions can help you feel less alone. Asking your parent questions about their cancer can help you feel calmer since sometimes our imaginations can lead us to believe things are worse than they are in reality. In addition to talking about it, journaling offers a safe, private space for you to write about your mom's or dad's cancer diagnosis and how it is affecting you. Often, teens find that being active, for example, going for a run or playing a sport, helps relieve stress.

## **I don't feel like having fun with my friends... is that normal?**

Yes! Sometimes you may feel bad hanging out with your friends or having fun while your mom or dad is going through cancer treatment. However, remember that your parents want you to continue doing things that you enjoy, too. If you find yourself feeling this way often, speak to your parents or another adult you trust.

## **CancerCare® Can Help**

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org) or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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*Edited by Ahuva Morris, LMSW*

<sup>1</sup>What Is Cancer? (2015, February 9). Retrieved July 21, 2015, from <http://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/what-is-cancer>

<sup>2</sup>Risk Factors for Cancer. (2015, April 29). Retrieved July 21, 2015, from <http://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention/risk>

## **My friends don't understand....**

You may find it easy to talk with some of your friends about coping with your parent's diagnosis. However, sometimes, your friends may not understand or know how to respond in a way that makes you feel comfortable. When your friends ask you questions that you don't feel like answering, it's okay to say, "Thank you for asking about my mom/dad but I don't feel like talking about that right now." Or you might say, "I appreciate when you ask me how I'm doing but sometimes I may just want to spend time with you and talk about other things."

## **Who can I talk to?**

You are not alone! Who do you feel most comfortable talking with about your parent's diagnosis? Is it your parents? Siblings? Some teens find it helpful to speak with their school guidance counselor, teacher or spiritual mentor. There are counselors who specialize in helping teens who have a parent with cancer. Speak to your parent if you are interested in talking with a counselor.

## **Am I the only one who has a parent with cancer?**

Absolutely not! In fact, there may be opportunities for you to meet other teens just like you who have a family member with cancer. This can be through a group at a local cancer center or an organization like CancerCare. If you are interested in connecting with other teens, ask your parent to call 800-813-HOPE (4673) and a CancerCare social worker can help locate a support group that is right for you. More information about CancerCare's services can be found by visiting [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org).



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National Office • 275 Seventh Avenue • New York, NY 10001

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