Childhood Cancer,
Questions Your Child May Ask

Children are naturally curious about their disease and have many questions about cancer and cancer treatment. Your child will expect you to have answers to most questions. Children may begin to ask questions right after diagnosis or may wait until later. Here are some common questions and some ideas to help you answer them.

WHY ME?

A child, like an adult, wonders "Why did I get cancer?" A child may feel that it is his or her fault and that somehow he or she caused the illness. Make it clear that not even the doctors know exactly what caused the cancer. Neither you, your child, nor his or her brothers or sisters did, said, or thought anything that caused the cancer. Stress also that cancer is not contagious, and your child did not "catch" it from someone else.

WILL I GET WELL?

Children often know about family members or friends who died of cancer. As a result, many children are afraid to ask if they will get well because they fear that the answer will be "no." Thus, you might tell your child that cancer is a serious disease, but that treatment - such as medicine, radiation, or an operation - has helped get rid of cancer in other children, and the doctors and nurses are trying their best to cure your child's cancer, too. Knowing that other people, such as family members, doctors, nurses, counselors, and others, care about your child and your family may also help him or her feel more secure.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME?

- When your child is first diagnosed with cancer, many new and scary things will happen. While at the doctor's office, hospital, or clinic, your child may see or play with other children who have cancer. These children may not be feeling well, may have lost their hair, or have had limbs removed because of cancer. Your child may wonder, "Will these things happen to me?" Yet, your child may be too afraid to ask questions. It is important to try to get your child to talk about these concerns. Explain ahead of time about the cancer, treatment, and possible side effects. Discuss what the doctor will do to help if side effects occur. You can also explain that there are many different types of cancer and that even when two children have the same cancer, what happens to one child will not always happen to the other.
- Children should be told about any changes in their treatment schedule or changes in the type of treatment they receive. This information helps them prepare for visits to the doctor or hospital. You may want to help your child keep a calendar that shows the days for doctor visits, treatments, or tests. Do not tell younger children about upcoming treatments far ahead of time if it makes them nervous.

WHY DO I HAVE TO TAKE MEDICINE WHEN I FEEL OKAY?

With cancer, your child may feel fine much of the time but need to take medicine often. Children do not understand why they have to take medicine when they feel well. You may want to remind your child of the reason for taking the medicine in the first place. For example, a child could be told: "Although you are feeling well, the bad cells are hiding. You must take the medicine for a while longer so it can find the bad cells and stop them from coming back."

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