

# What's Happening to Mom?



*Talking to your children  
about breast cancer*





Your breast cancer diagnosis affects your entire family. You may wonder how it will affect your children. You want to protect your children whatever their age. So your first thought may be to not tell them. But most children know when something is wrong. One way to help them is to talk about what is going on now and what will happen in the future.

This booklet explains the importance of being honest with your children about your diagnosis and treatment.

The first part provides practical information for all parents. The second gives age-related information for how to talk to your child about breast cancer and offers ways to help them cope.



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## Preparing yourself

Before talking with your children, prepare what you might say. Consider these ideas:

### Think about how you feel.

A breast cancer diagnosis is a shock. Give yourself time to adjust. Being aware of your own emotions will make it easier for you to tell your children. If you do not think that you can tell them by yourself, ask another family member to help.

### Have a plan of action.

It will help if you know the next steps in your treatment plan before talking with your children. This way, you can tell them exactly how you are going to fight breast cancer. Having a plan in place can be comforting to you and your children.



### Here are some resources that can help you talk with your children:

- Your doctor, nurse, social worker or cancer counselor
- Clergy
- Cancer information centers at local hospitals
- Your child's school counselor
- A local bookstore or library
- Local support groups for families coping with cancer
- Resources listed at the back of this booklet

## Telling your children

As a parent, telling your children you have breast cancer may be very hard. There is no best way to tell your child. Here are some common questions:



### Should I tell my children?

Yes. Being open and honest with your children is one gift you can give them. As a parent, you may want to protect your children from anything that will hurt them. But children are very aware and can sense when something is wrong. If they are not told, they may think something much worse.

### Are my children old enough to understand?

Yes. If you use simple terms, even very young children can understand. The older the child, the more detail you can give. Pay attention to how your child reacts. Let them set the pace about how much information you give and when.

### What if I don't know all the answers?

It is fine to say, "I don't know the answer right now, but I'll find out." This gives you time to learn more about your breast cancer. It also leaves the door open for future talks with your child. Some questions cannot be answered, and some answers will come with time. It is important for your children to understand that you and your family will be learning about breast cancer together.



## Children's worries

Only you know the best way to talk with your children. But when thinking about how to tell them of your diagnosis, consider each child's age, maturity level and personality. The amount and type of information you give to your teenage son will be different from what you tell your seven year old daughter.

While all children are different, most will have two worries:

**Who is going to take care of me?** Children of all ages need to feel safe and secure. They will want to know who will take care of them when you are in the hospital or during your recovery. Tell your children that you will do your best to be there. When you can't be there, make sure that they know a parent, grandparent or another trusted adult will be there for them. Try to limit the number of caregivers. Maintain a normal daily routine.

**Is mom going to die?** This is a common question for children to ask. Again, it is important to be open and honest with them. Be careful not to make promises that you are not sure you can keep. Your answer should be honest, yet hopeful. For example, you could say, "I'm not sure. But I am going to work with my doctors to do everything I can to fight this."

Giving honest, realistic answers to these questions will help lessen your child's fears.



## Honesty and safety

Being honest and creating a sense of safety are key to helping your children through this time. When your children see you as open and honest, they may respond in the same way.

### Be honest

- Ask your children what they already know about breast cancer. Clear up any wrong information they may have.
- Make sure your children know they didn't do anything to cause you to get breast cancer.
- Encourage them to ask questions. Really listen and look at them during your talks.
- Ask your children to repeat what you have told them. This will help you know if they understand.
- Watch for signs that they are uncomfortable. Ask if they would like to take a break and continue talking later.
- Encourage your children to express how they feel. One way to do this is to express your own feelings.

### Create a sense of safety

- Spend time alone with each child.
- Keep your children informed of your treatment schedule.
- Prepare them for side effects, such as loss of a breast, weight changes, fatigue and hair loss.
- Try to keep family routines and rituals, like eating dinner together or holding family meetings.

Continue to laugh and have fun — it will be good for all of you.



## Allow your children to help

Most children will want to help during this time. Allowing them to help around the house provides a way for them to show their love. It also will allow them to feel they are helping. It may even make them feel less helpless. Keep in mind your children will want to choose their own task. Their enthusiasm may also be short-lived. The support each child gives will be based on his or her age, maturity and personality.

Do not assume that your children know what to do during this time. Discuss what needs to be done around the house and how they can help. Make a list of specific tasks and ask for volunteers.



It is important to give your children jobs that are age-appropriate. Watch for signs that your children are taking on too much responsibility. Too much responsibility may cause them to:

- punish younger siblings.
- act overly concerned for your partner.
- try to run the household.

Giving your children age-appropriate jobs may help prevent them from growing up too soon. If responsibilities become too much for your family to handle, ask for help from other family members or friends.

## How your children cope

Your children may feel angry, fearful or sad. Their emotions are important. Their actions may tell you what they are feeling. This is especially true for young children. Many parents think their children are not affected by their parent's diagnosis. But children may hide their feelings to protect their parents. You may not notice that their actions are a reaction to what they are feeling. Pay close attention to what your children say and do during this time.

You may notice a change in personality or behavior that seems to last a long time. If so, talk with your child about it without judgment. For example, you can ask, "Are you not doing your homework because you're angry or afraid? It's okay to be afraid." Inform your child's teacher or school counselor what is going on at home. Continue to set your family rules and enforce them.

If you feel your child is not doing well or having trouble coping, you may want to seek professional help. A child or family therapist with cancer experience, social worker or member of the clergy may be able to help.

### There are signs your child may be having difficulty:

- Thumb-sucking or bed-wetting
- A change in eating or sleeping habits
- A drop in grades
- Disruptive behavior
- Dramatic mood swings
- Spending more time with friends away from home
- Unusual behavior



## Toddlers and preschoolers (2-5 years old)

### Actions speak louder than words.

Watch your children during playtime for signs of how they are coping. Young children often create fantasies to cope with feelings of fear and anger. Giving your toddlers correct information may prevent them from imagining the worst.

### Understanding is limited.

Explain to them that they cannot catch cancer and that nothing they did caused it. Give simple information. For example, “Mommy is sick.” Show them where the cancer is on a toy or doll. Use children’s books to explain breast cancer to them.

### They are very curious, but will not sit still for long.

Expect to be asked, “Why?”. Give short, simple answers. Plan to have short talks about breast cancer with them often.

### Suggestions for helping your young children cope:

- Try to maintain your daily routine with everyday activities, like reading at bedtime.
- Ask a friend or family member to spend time at home with your children when you cannot.
- Schedule “play dates” so your children can spend time with other children.
- Encourage your children to draw pictures or sing songs to express what they are feeling.
- Prepare them for physical changes from your treatment, like hair loss, weight changes or loss of a breast.

## School-aged children (6-9 years old)

School-aged children understand their place in the world.

They are learning that they are part of a family and a community. They can understand that your illness may prevent you from doing some of your normal activities.

They want to know details.

Use pictures to give simple descriptions of breast cancer and your treatments. Explain that they cannot catch cancer and did nothing to cause it. Watch for teachable moments. Relate what is happening to you and your family while watching a television show, a movie or reading a book.

They are becoming more sensitive.

Encourage them to talk about their feelings with you or others. Share your feelings with them. Let them know it is okay to cry.

Suggestions for helping your school-aged children cope:

- Routine is important. Try to maintain family and after-school activities. When you need to make other plans, let them know.
- Show them ways to express their feelings through drawing, sculpting clay or building blocks.
- Prepare them for physical changes from your treatment, like hair loss, weight changes or loss of a breast.
- Reassure them that they will always be taken care of by those who love them.



## Pre-teens (10-12 years old)

### Reactions may be hard to understand.

They may feel confused about what is happening. They may feel torn between your influence as a parent and the need for approval from friends.

### They may be able to understand and reflect on abstract ideas.

Use comparisons to explain what is happening. Invite them to go with you to doctors' appointments and visit you in the hospital. Leave information on the kitchen counter for them to pick up.

### It may be difficult for them to share their feelings.

Remind them that any feelings they have are normal and okay. Be open in sharing your feelings. If they feel embarrassed about aspects of your disease, talk about the best way to handle it.

### Suggestions for helping your pre-teen children cope:

- Reassure them that they will still be able to join after-school activities and spend time with friends.
- Encourage your pre-teens to keep a journal to help them work through their feelings.
- Prepare them for physical changes that result from your treatment, like weight changes, hair loss or loss of a breast.
- Encourage them to talk with others they trust — family members, friends or a school counselor.



## Teenagers (13-18 years old)

### Reactions may be complicated.

Teens may think they know all the answers. They are becoming more independent. They may struggle with the idea of doing their “own” thing and doing the “right” thing - by helping out the family.



### They may be able to understand adult situations.

Give them as much information about breast cancer as they want. They can decide when they are ready to talk about it or when they need time to think. If and when they are ready, let them go with you to appointments or visit you in the hospital.

### Your teenage children have their own fears.

Assure them that it is all right to talk to a friend or another adult about how they are feeling. Also, address any fears that they may have about their own risk of breast cancer.

### Suggestions for helping your teens cope:

- Reassure them that they will still be able to join after-school activities and spend time with friends.
- Encourage them to keep a journal to help them work through their feelings.
- Give them “grown-up” jobs to do, like driving the car to run errands or making phone calls.
- Encourage them to continue to plan for the future, such as going away to summer camp or preparing for college.



## Adults

### They may fear losing you.

Adults fear losing their parents too. Let them know that it is okay to talk about their fears. They may talk with you or with others.

### They can help take care of you.

Adults are often focused on their own careers and families. They also may want to help you. Allowing them to help may make them feel useful. They may be able to help gather information. Ask them to pay bills or run errands. Some may feel guilty about living far away or having other duties. Make sure to explain your diagnosis and treatment plan to them. This can help them understand your situation. It can help them plan how to help you.

### They need to know their risk of breast cancer.

Now that you have been diagnosed with breast cancer, you may be concerned about your child's risk of developing breast cancer. You may feel guilty about it. While the risk is higher for them, it does not mean that they will develop the disease. Talk to them about these concerns. Encourage them to talk with a health care provider to get more information about their risk.



## National and local organizations

**Susan G. Komen®** offers a breast care helpline service to those in need of breast health and breast cancer information and support.

Se habla español.

Phone: 1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)

Hours: 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. ET / 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. PT.

[www.komen.org](http://www.komen.org)

**The American Cancer Society** publishes specific information and sponsors support groups to help parents and children cope with cancer. Se habla español.

Phone: 1-800-ACS-2345

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

**CancerCare** offers free counseling and emotional support, information about cancer and treatments, financial assistance, educational seminars and referral to other support services.

Phone: 1-800-813 HOPE

[www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org)

**Cancer Information Service**, a part of the National Cancer Institute, has information specialists that are available to help answer your cancer-related questions whether you are a patient, family member or friend, health care provider, or researcher. Se habla español.

Phone: 1-800-4-CANCER

[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

**The Cancer Support Community** provides free psychological and emotional support to cancer patients and their children 5-18.

Phone: 1-888-793-WELL

[www.cancersupportcommunity.org](http://www.cancersupportcommunity.org)

**Kids Connected** offers a hotline, Internet site and support groups for children to talk to other children who have a loved one with cancer.

Phone: 1-800-899-2866

[www.kidsconnected.org](http://www.kidsconnected.org)

**Kid Support** helps children cope when a parent or other family member has cancer, by providing access to high-quality adult led peer support programming.

Phone: 1-888-793-9355

[www.kidsupport.org](http://www.kidsupport.org)

This list of resources is made available solely as a suggested resource. Please note that it is not a complete listing of materials or information available on breast health and breast cancer. This information is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or to replace the services of a medical professional. Further, Susan G. Komen® does not endorse, recommend or make any warranties or representations regarding the accuracy, completeness, timeliness, quality or non-infringement of any of the materials, products or information provided by the organizations referred to in this list.



1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)  
[www.komen.org](http://www.komen.org)

**Other booklets in this series:**

- What's Happening to the One We Love?  
*Helping co-survivors cope with breast cancer*
- What's Happening to Me?  
*Coping and living with breast cancer*

We would like to extend thanks to breast cancer survivors, their children, and our panel of professional experts who helped in the development of this booklet.