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If Your Child Has Cancer

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What is cancer?

Cancer starts when cells grow out of control and crowd out normal cells. This makes it hard for the body to work the way it should.

Cancer can start any place in the body. It can then spread from where it started to other

- Where do you think the cancer started?
- Would you please write down the kind of cancer you think my child might have?
- What will happen next?

How does the doctor know my child has cancer?

The symptoms of cancer depend on the [type of cancer](#)², where the cancer is, how big it is, and how much it affects other parts of your child's body. Talk to your child's doctor about any changes you've noticed. The doctor will ask questions about your child's symptoms and do a physical exam.

If signs are pointing to cancer, more tests will be done. Talk to the doctor about the tests and what they're like. Your child may need medicine to make them sleep for some of these tests.

Tests that may be done

Here are some of the [tests your child may need](#)³:

Lab tests: Blood and urine tests can be used to help find some types of cancer. They can also be used to find out how well your child's body is working.

Ultrasound: For this test, a small wand is moved around on your child's skin. It gives off sound waves and picks up the echoes as they bounce off tissues. The echoes are made into a picture on a computer screen.

X-rays: X-rays of the part of your child's body that might have cancer are sometimes the first tests done. A chest x-ray may also be done to see if the cancer has spread to the lungs.

longer, or might not show up until years later. For instance, radiation can sometimes affect bone growth, or it can affect the brain. Talk to your child's cancer care team about what you can expect during and after treatment.

Chemo

Chemo is short for [chemotherapy](#)⁷, the use of drugs to fight cancer. The drugs are often given through a needle into a vein. They can also be given as shots or pills. These drugs go into the blood and spread through the body.

Chemo is often given in cycles or rounds. Each round of treatment is followed by a break.

Most of the time, 2 or more chemo drugs are given.

Side effects of chemo

Chemo can make your child feel very tired or sick to their stomach, and it might cause their hair to fall out. Some chemo drugs can cause other side effects, too. But most of these problems tend to go away after treatment ends.

~~There are ways to treat~~ **There are ways to treat** chemo side effects. If your child has side effects, talk to the cancer care team so they can help.

Some chemo drugs can have effects that might not show up until years later. For instance, some chemo drugs can affect the heart, or they might raise the risk of getting another cancer later on. Talk to the cancer care team so you know what to look out for.

Stem cell transplant

A [stem cell transplant \(SCT\)](#)⁸ lets doctors use very high doses of chemo (and c(A)Tjm(r98gent is follow

above). Talk to the cancer care team so you know what to look out for.

Targeted drugs

[Targeted drugs](#)⁹ work mostly on some of the changes inside cancer cells that make them different from normal cells in the body. They may work even if other treatment doesn't. They may be given alone or along with chemo.

Side effects of targeted drugs

Side effects depend on which drug is used. These drugs might make a person feel sick to the stomach and might cause chills, fever, rashes, and headaches. Some cause low blood counts and heart and liver problems. Side effects often go away after treatment ends.

There are ways to treat most of the side effects caused by targeted drugs. If your child has side effects, talk to the cancer care team so they can help.

Immunotherapy drugs

[Immunotherapy drugs](#)¹⁰ help your child's own immune system fight the cancer. Immune treatments can be helpful in treating some types of cancer. These treatments are most often given through a needle into a vein.

Side effects of immunotherapy drugs

Side effects depend on which drug is used. Some might cause a fever or make your child feel sick. Rarely, these drugs might cause more serious side effects. If your child has side effects, talk to the cancer care team so they can help.

Clinical trials

Clinical trials are research studies that test new drugs or other treatments in people. They compare standard treatments with others that may be better.

Clinical trials are one way to get the newest cancer treatment. They are the best way for doctors to find better ways to treat cancer. But they may not be the best option for every child. If your child's doctor can find a clinical trial that's studying the kind of cancer your child has, it's up to you whether to take part. And if you do sign your child up for a clinical trial, you can always stop at any time.

If you would like your child to be in a clinical trial, start by asking the doctor if your clinic or hospital takes part in clinical trials. See [Clinical Trials](#)¹¹ to learn more.

What about other treatments that I hear about?

When your child has cancer you might hear about [other ways to treat the cancer or treat your child's symptoms](#)¹². These may not always be standard medical treatments. These treatments may be vitamins, herbs, diets, and other things. You may wonder about these treatments.

Some of these are known to help, but many have not been tested. Some have been shown not to help. A few have even been found to be harmful. Talk to your child's doctor about anything you're thinking about using, whether it's a vitamin, a diet, or anything else.

Questions to ask about treatments and side effects

- Will my child need to see other doctors?
- What treatment do you think is best for my child?
- What's the goal of this treatment? Do you think it could cure the cancer?
- Will treatment include surgery? If so, who will do the surgery?
- What will the surgery be like?
- How will my child's body look and work after surgery?
- Will my child need other types of treatment, too?
- What will these treatments be like?
- What's the goal of these treatments?
- What side effects could my child have from these treatments?
- What can we do about side effects that my child might have?
- Will my child be able to have children someday?
- Are there any other long-term side effects we need to watch out for?

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What will happen after treatment?

You'll be glad [when treatment is over](#)¹³. But it can be hard not to worry about cancer coming back. Even when cancer never comes back, people still worry about it. For years after treatment ends, your child will see their cancer doctor. At first, visits may be every few months. Then, the longer your child is cancer-free, the less often the visits are needed.

Be sure to take your child to all of these follow-up visits. The doctors will ask about symptoms, do physical exams, and may do tests to see if the cancer has come back.

Some cancer treatments can have long-term side effects. Some of these might not show up until years later. Be sure your child keeps seeing a doctor even as they grow older, to watch for any problems that come up.

Having cancer and dealing with treatment can be hard, but it can also be a time to look at life in new ways. You might be thinking about how to improve your child's health. Call us at 1-800-227-2345 or talk to your child's doctor to find out what you can do to help your child feel better.

For connecting and sharing during a cancer journey

Anyone with cancer, their caregivers, families, and friends, can benefit from help and support. The American Cancer Society offers the Cancer Survivors Network (CSN), a safe place to connect with others who share similar interests and experiences. We also partner with CaringBridge, a free online tool that helps people dealing with illnesses like cancer stay in touch with their friends, family members, and support network by creating their own personal page where they share their journey and health updates.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/understanding-cancer/what-is-cancer.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/cancer-in-children/types-of-childhood-cancers.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/tests.html
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13. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/children-with-cancer/after-treatment.html
14. www.cancer.org

Words to know

Biopsy (BY-op-see): A test that takes out a small piece of body tissue to see if there are cancer cells in it.

Bone marrow: The soft middle part of some bones where new blood cells are made. Some cancers (such as leukemias) start in the bone marrow, while some other types of cancer can spread there.

Carcinoma (CAR-sin-O-muh): Cancer that starts in the lining layer of organs. Most cancers are carcinomas.

Immune system: The body system that fights infection.

Immunotherapy(IM-yoo-no-THAIR-uh-pee): Treatments that uses the body's immune system to fight cancer.

Leukemia (loo-KEY-me-uh): Cancer that starts in the bone marrow and blood.

Lymph nodes (limf nodes): Small, bean-shaped collections of immune system tissue found all over the body and connected by lymph vessels; also called lymph glands.

Lymphoma (lim-FOAM-uh): Cancer that starts in the immune system cells called lymphocytes (LIM-fo-sites), which are a kind of white blood cell.

Malignant (muh-LIG-nunt): Having cancer in it.

Metastasis (muh-TAS-tuh-sis): The spread of cancer from where it started to other places in the body.

Pediatric oncologist (pee-dee-AT-rick on-KAHL-uh-jist): A doctor who treats children

with cancer.

How can I learn more?

We have a lot more information for you. You can find it online at www.cancer.org¹⁴. Or, you can call our toll-free number at 1-800-227-2345 to talk to one of our cancer information specialists.

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