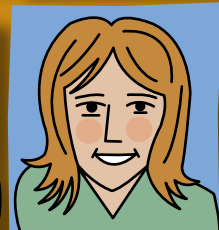
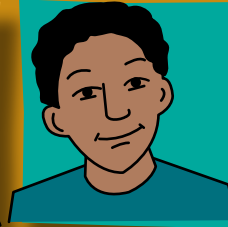
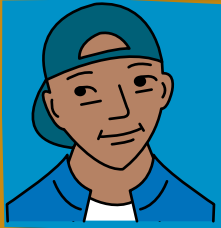
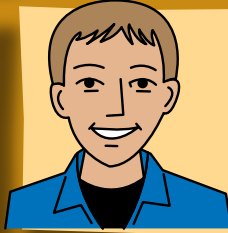


# When Your Parent Has Cancer

A Guide for Teens





# This booklet is for **you**

If your mom, dad, or an adult close to you has cancer, this booklet is for you.

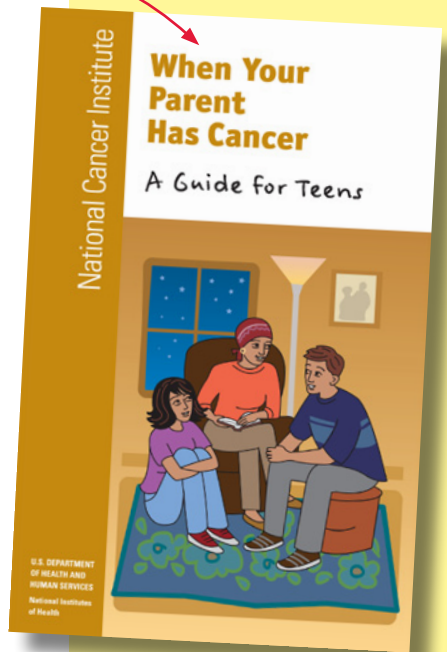
Here you can read about what has helped other teens get through this tough time.

Doctors, nurses, social workers, friends, and family are working hard to help your mom or dad get better.

**You are a very important part of that team, too.**

In the weeks and months ahead, you may feel a whole range of emotions. Some days will be good, and things might seem like they used to. Other days may be harder.

This booklet can help prepare you for some of the things you might face. It can also help you learn to handle living with a parent or relative who has cancer.



**Get free copies of  
this booklet from  
our Web site:**

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

**or by calling**

**NCI's Cancer  
Information Service  
at 1-800-4-CANCER  
(1-800-422-6237).**

## **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank the many teens, health care providers, and scientists who helped to develop and review this booklet.

## How to use this booklet

You may want to read this booklet cover to cover. Or maybe you'll just read those sections that interest you most. Some teens pull the booklet out now and again when they need it.

You may want to share this booklet with your mom, dad, brothers, and sisters. It might help you bring up something that has been on your mind. You could ask people in your family to read a certain chapter and then talk about it together later.

We've put words that may be new to you in **bold**. Turn to the glossary at the back of this booklet for their definitions.



Wherever you go,  
go with all your heart.

—Confucius

# Table of contents

## CHAPTER 1

**You've just learned that your parent has cancer**  
**page 1**

## CHAPTER 2

**Learning about cancer**  
**page 9**

## CHAPTER 3

**Cancer treatment**  
**page 13**

## CHAPTER 4

**What your parent may be feeling**  
**page 21**

## CHAPTER 5

**Changes in your family**  
**page 23**

## CHAPTER 6

**Taking care of yourself**  
**page 31**

## CHAPTER 7

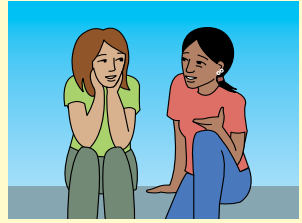
**Finding support**  
**page 37**



However long the night,

CHAPTER 8

**You and your friends**  
**page 43**



CHAPTER 9

**How you can help your parent**  
**page 47**



CHAPTER 10

**After treatment**  
**page 51**

CHAPTER 11

**The road ahead**  
**page 57**



CHAPTER 12

**Learning more on your own**  
**page 59**

CHART A

**Cancer team members**  
**page 63**

CHART B

**Monitoring Tests**  
**page 64**

**Glossary**  
**page 66**



## Chapter 1

# You've just learned that your parent has cancer

You've just learned that one of the most important people in your life has **cancer**. Do you feel shocked, numb, angry, or afraid? Do you feel like life is unfair? One thing is certain—you don't feel good.

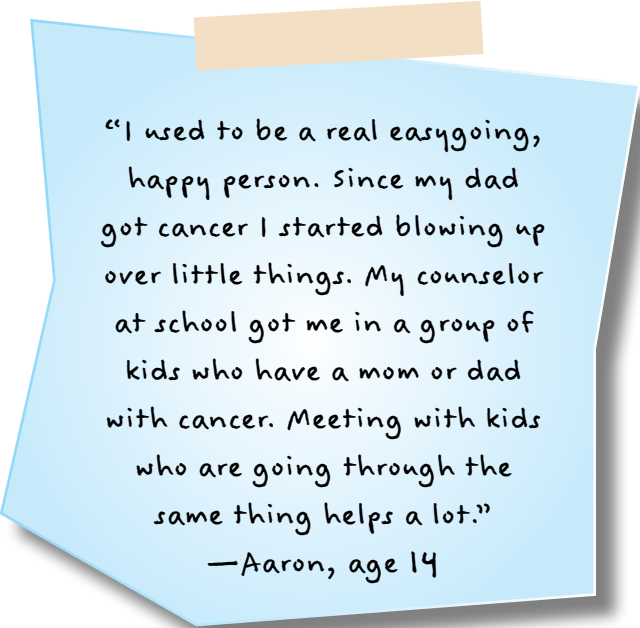
**For now, try to focus on these facts:**

- ➔ **Many people survive cancer.** There are about 12 million cancer survivors living in the U.S. today. That's because scientists are discovering new and better ways to find and treat cancer. During this really tough time, it will help you to have hope.
- ➔ **You're not alone.** Right now it might seem that no one else in the world feels the way you do. In a way you're right. No one can feel exactly like you do. But it might help to know that many teens have a parent who has cancer. Talking to others may help you sort out your feelings.

**Remember, you are not alone.**

"I knew something was wrong the minute I walked in the kitchen. My mom was so quiet. Then Mom told me she has cancer. I felt like I was going to faint. I could barely hold the tears back. I felt so scared. I ran to my room and just sat on the bed for the longest time. I called my best friend and kind of lost it. —Sarah, age 16

- **You're not to blame.** Cancer is a disease with various causes, many of which doctors don't fully understand. None of these causes has anything to do with what you've done, thought, or said.
- **Balance is important.** Many teens feel like their parent's cancer is always on their mind. Others try to avoid it. Try to strike a balance. You can be concerned about your parent and still stay connected with people and activities that you care about.
- **Knowledge is power.** It can help to learn more about cancer and cancer treatments. Sometimes what you imagine is actually worse than the reality.



"I used to be a real easygoing, happy person. Since my dad got cancer I started blowing up over little things. My counselor at school got me in a group of kids who have a mom or dad with cancer. Meeting with kids who are going through the same thing helps a lot."

—Aaron, age 14



## Your feelings

As you deal with your parent's cancer, you'll probably feel all kinds of things. **Many other teens who have a parent with cancer have felt the same way you do now.** Some of these emotions are listed below. Think about people you can talk with about your feelings.

### Check off the feelings you have:

scared

- My world is falling apart.
- I'm afraid that my parent might die.
- I'm afraid that someone else in my family might catch cancer. (They can't.)
- I'm afraid that something might happen to my parent at home, and I won't know what to do.



It's normal to feel scared when your parent has cancer. Some of your fears may be real. Others may be based on things that won't happen. And some fears may lessen over time.

guilty

- I feel guilty because I'm healthy and my parent is sick.
- I feel guilty when I laugh and have fun.

You may feel bad about having fun when your parent is sick. However, having fun doesn't mean that you care any less. In fact, it will probably help your parent to see you doing things you enjoy.



angry

- I am mad that my mom or dad got sick.
- I am upset at the doctors.
- I am angry at God for letting this happen.
- I am angry at myself for feeling the way I do.



Anger often covers up other feelings that are harder to show. Try not to let your anger build up.

neglected

- I feel left out.
- I don't get any attention.
- No one ever tells me what's going on.
- My family never talks anymore.



When a parent has cancer, it's common for the family's focus to change. Some people in the family may feel left out. Your parent with cancer may be using his or her energy to get better. Your well parent may be focused on helping your parent with cancer. Your parents don't mean for you to feel left out. It just happens because so much is going on.

When you come to the end of your rope,

lonely

- No one understands what I'm going through.
- My friends don't come over anymore.
- My friends don't seem to know what to say to me anymore.



We look at some things you can do to help situations with friends in **Chapter 8: You and Your Friends**. For now, try to remember that these feelings won't last forever.

embarrassed

- I'm sometimes embarrassed to be out in public with my sick parent.
- I don't know how to answer people's questions.

Many teens who feel embarrassed about having a parent with cancer say it gets easier to deal with over time.



## What you're feeling is normal

There is no one "right" way to feel. And you're not alone—many other teens in your situation have felt the same way. Some have said that having a parent with cancer changes the way they look at things in life. Some even said that it made them stronger.

tie a knot and hang on. —Franklin D. Roosevelt

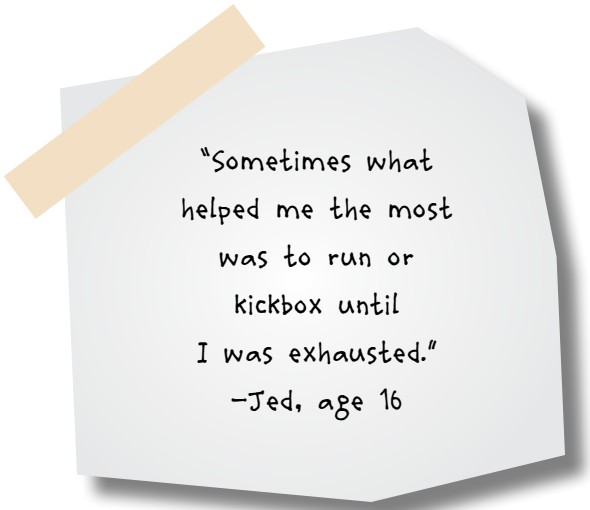
## Dealing with your feelings

A lot of people are uncomfortable sharing their feelings. They ignore them and hope they'll go away. Other people choose to act cheerful when they're really not. They think that by acting upbeat they won't feel sad or angry anymore. This may help for a little while, but not over the long run. **Actually, holding your feelings inside can keep you from getting the help you need.**

### Try these tips:

- Talk with family and friends who you feel close to. You owe it to yourself.
- Write down your thoughts in a journal.
- Join a **support group** to talk with other teens who are facing some of the same things you are. Or meet with a counselor. We'll learn more about these ideas in **Chapter 7: Finding support.**

It is probably hard to imagine right now, but, if you let yourself, you can grow stronger as a person through this experience.

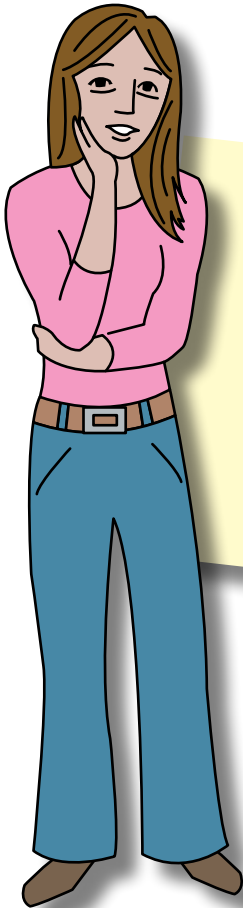


"Sometimes what helped me the most was to run or kickbox until I was exhausted."  
-Jed, age 16

## Does this sound like you?

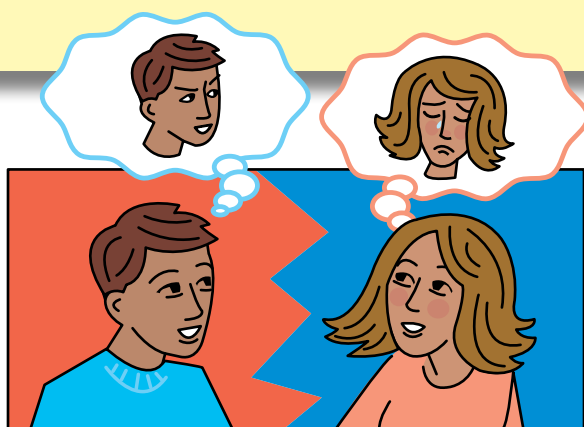


Many kids think that they need to protect their parents by not making them worry. They think that they have to be perfect and not cause any trouble because one of their parents is sick. If you feel this way, remember that no one can be perfect all the time. You need time to vent, to feel sad, and to be happy. Try to let your parents know how you feel—even if you have to start the conversation.



"I just kept telling myself  
that I was going to let  
this experience make me—  
not break me."  
—Lydia, age 16

"After Dad got cancer, my big sister always seemed to be making excuses to get out of the house. One day, I just told her off. Instead of getting mad, she started crying. She said she couldn't stand seeing Dad hurting. I told her I felt the same way. Now we talk more and keep each other going. It's good." -Jamie, age 13



Experience is what you get  
by not having it  
when you need it.

-Anonymous

## Chapter 2

# Learning about cancer

Learning about cancer will help you understand what your parent is going through. Knowing more about cancer and how it's treated can take some of the fear away. Some of what you have seen or heard about cancer may not apply to your parent. Most people feel better when they know what to expect.

“When Dad told me he had cancer, I got really scared. Everything I'd always heard about cancer was just terrible. Then I thought, ‘Hey, what do I really know about cancer?’ The answer was, ‘Not much.’ So I started reading books and stuff on the Internet. My dad even told me that some of what I found on the Web wasn't right for the kind of cancer he has. Cancer is still pretty scary, but I've learned that people survive it. I'm not so afraid anymore.” —Abdul, age 14

### Here are a few things to remember:

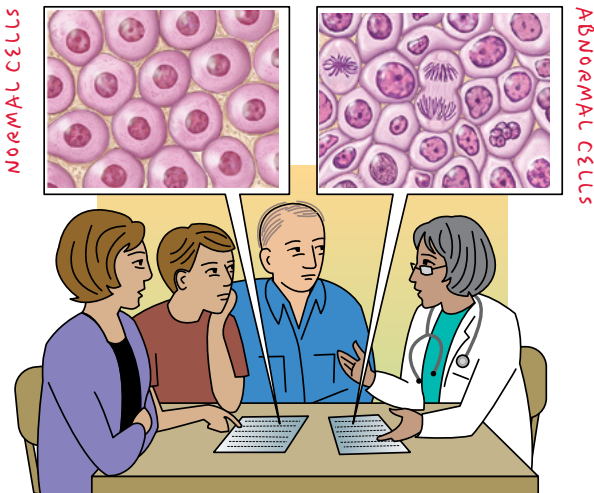
- Nothing you did, thought, or said caused your parent to get cancer.
- You can't catch cancer from another person.
- Scientists are discovering new and better ways to find and treat cancer.
- Many people survive cancer.

## What is cancer?

Doctors have found more than 100 different types of cancer. Cancer is a group of many related diseases that begin in **cells**, the body's basic unit of life. To understand cancer, it's helpful to know what happens when normal cells become cancer cells.

Normally, cells grow and divide to make more cells only when the body needs them. This orderly process helps keep the body healthy. Sometimes, however, cells keep dividing when new cells aren't needed. These extra cells form a mass of **tissue** called a growth, or **tumor**. Tumors can be **benign** or **malignant**. Some cancers do not form a tumor. For example, **leukemia** is a cancer of the **bone marrow** and blood.

- ➔ **Benign tumors aren't cancer.** They can often be removed and don't spread to other parts of the body.
- ➔ **Malignant tumors are cancer.** Cells in these tumors are abnormal and divide and grow without control or order. They can invade and damage nearby tissues and also spread to organs in other parts of the body. The spread of cancer from one part of the body to another is called **metastasis**.





Most cancers are named for the organ or type of cell in which they begin. For example, cancer that begins in the lung is called **lung cancer**.

## Why do people get cancer?

The causes of most cancers are not known. Scientists are still learning about things that may put people at a higher risk for certain types of cancer. **Risk factors** for cancer include age, a **family history** of certain cancers, use of tobacco products, being exposed to radiation or certain chemicals, infection with certain viruses or bacteria, and certain genetic changes.

Although no one can tell the future, it is good to keep in mind that most cancers are not passed down from parent to child. That is, they are not **inherited**. However, a family history of cancer can sometimes be a risk factor. It may help to talk with your parent or a doctor to learn more about the kind of cancer that your parent has.

## Can doctors cure cancer?

Every year scientists discover better ways to treat cancer. That means many people are successfully treated for cancer. However, doctors are careful not to use the word “cure” until a patient remains free of cancer for several years. Cancer treatment may cause a **remission**, which means that the doctor can’t find signs of cancer. But sometimes the cancer comes back. This is called a **relapse** or **recurrence**. Whether your parent can be cured of cancer depends on many things, and no booklet can tell you exactly what to expect. It is best to talk with your parent and his or her doctor or nurse.

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