

Telling Children about your Oesophageal Cancer Diagnosis

Discovering you have Oesophageal Cancer will undoubtedly be a difficult time for you, your family and those close to you. Your journey will be as individual as you are. It can be hard to get your head around it all, so you might decide to take some time before you talk to others about your diagnosis. You may need time to think and understand your own feelings, before speaking to others.

Dealing with your diagnosis if you have a child/children will also pose some challenges for you. You may find the following information helpful when speaking with your child/children or in preparing to explain your cancer diagnosis to children.

Discussing your Oesophageal Cancer diagnosis with your child/children

Your spouse, partner or former partner may already know about your diagnosis. If not, you may want to tell them first before deciding to talk to your child/children about your diagnosis. If this is not possible it may be another family member or a friend that you can rely on for advice. It might help you to have their support in deciding how to approach the subject and exactly what you want to talk about.

You may be waiting on test results or further information and might want to hold off telling your child/children about your diagnosis until you have all this information.

You will know how much information your child/children can take in depending on their age and maturity. Your family or friends or someone your child/ children know may have experienced cancer before and this will also impact their reaction to the news that you have cancer. However, your child/children will most likely notice that there is something happening or that there are changes in the household.

Telling children of different ages

- Very young children may not fully understand what cancer means and you may decide to tell them that you are sick currently and will have to go to hospital and that for a short time you may not be able to do everything that you can now. Reassure them that they can ask you questions when they want to. It may be comforting to tell young children new information at each stage of your treatment a little at a time, so they understand changes such as hair loss or fatigue as it happens.
- Children over the age of 10 may be able to understand more information and may have heard of cancer before. They may be a little fearful and have a lot of questions for you. You could seek

support from a local support group in preparing to talk to your child/children or getting them help dealing with your diagnosis such as play or talk therapy. The Oesophageal Cancer Fund would be happy to assist you in finding a local support group or you could check our website for further details.

The guiding principle should be that you tell the truth about your diagnosis in a way that your child/children are able to understand. This will also help to prepare them for the changes that will happen in the family. Equally, if you encourage your child/children to talk and ask questions about your cancer diagnosis, they may be better able to cope in general and into the future knowing that there is an open way to discuss their feelings, emotions, and questions with their family members.

You might also consider letting their school teacher(s) know that you are dealing with an illness and to ask their help in keeping an extra eye on your child/children during this tough time. That way, the school will alert you to any problems or anxiety from your child's perspective.

How to approach the discussion

You may want to explain the following things to your child/children:

- The type of cancer you have
- Where the cancer is located
- What will be happening next in terms of hospital or doctors' visits
- How your treatment will impact you and your daily activities
- How their daily activities will be impacted and who will be helping them
- That they can ask questions or talk about their feelings and who they can do this with
- How you will keep them informed along the way

Depending on your child/children's age it may be better to talk to your child/children in simple everyday language. If you have more than one child at different ages it may be better to talk to them separately depending on how much they will be able to understand and how much information you want to tell them. It may help to plan how you will talk with each of your children. You can also think, as much as possible, about what you want to say and how you will answer questions they may have in a way that they can understand. Just remember that your children will talk to each other about what's happening, so it is important to be consistent.

Children can be very blunt with their questions and may ask "Are you going to die?" and you need to craft a simple, positive response to deal with that one and don't dwell on it. Maybe explain

how you have a great doctor, and you are doing your best, as you always have, to reach 100 years of age!

There are some other excellent resources available from other organisations that you might find useful such as:

The Irish Cancer Society

<https://www.cancer.ie/cancer-information-and-support/cancer-support/coping-with-cancer/information-for-patients/talking-to-family-and-friends#children>

The American Cancer Society

<https://www.cancer.org/treatment/children-and-cancer/when-a-family-member-has-cancer.html>