



Cancer and Children

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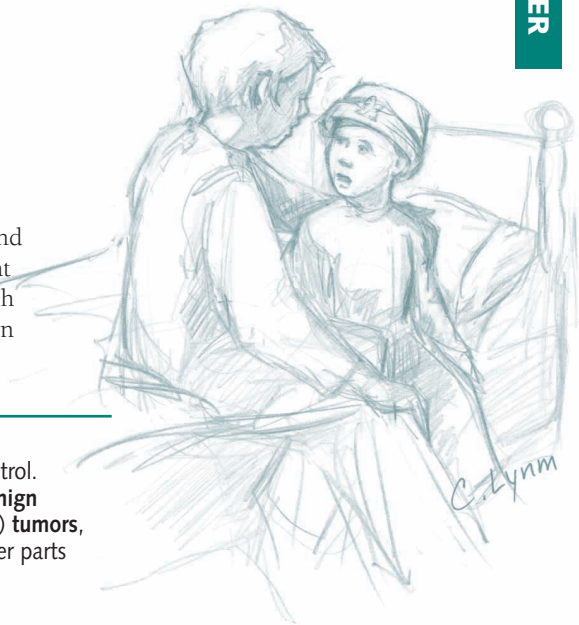
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Cancer and Children

When a child is diagnosed with cancer, it can be a frightening and confusing time for parents and the child. However, with recent advances in cancer drugs and treatments, 80% of children with cancer live into adulthood. The April 10, 2002, issue of *JAMA* contains an article about adult survivors of childhood cancers.



COMMON CHILDHOOD CANCERS

Cancer is a group of diseases that occur when cells in the body grow out of control. Some cancers form growths called tumors, but not all tumors are cancerous. **Benign** (noncancerous) **tumors** can often be removed and, unlike **malignant** (cancerous) **tumors**, are rarely a threat to life. Cancer is life-threatening because it can spread to other parts of the body (**metastasize**). The most common childhood cancers are

- **Leukemia**—cancer of the white blood cells
- **Lymphoma**—cancer of the lymph nodes
- **Brain tumors**—cancer that can be found in many parts of the brain
- **Osteosarcoma**—bone cancer

TALKING TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT CANCER

It is very important to talk calmly, honestly, and openly to your child about his or her illness. Depending on your child's age, he or she will be able to understand varying amounts of information. Below are some general guidelines by age group; however, every child is different, and the guidelines for your child's age group might not be appropriate for your child. Be sure to allow for this.

- Children up to 2 years of age cannot understand cancer. They may cry or seem uncooperative during examinations or treatments. Provide comfort and let them know it is okay to cry when something, such as a needle stick, hurts.
- Two- to 7-year-olds might think that their illness is a punishment for something they have done, said, or thought. Explain that this is not true, and that treatments and tests are to help get rid of the cancer and make them well. You may want to tell them that cancer is "bad" cells and that treatment helps "good" cells win.
- Seven- to 12-year-olds can understand more details about cancer and can grasp that getting treatment and going to the doctor can help them get better, even though the treatments may cause temporary pain and discomfort.
- Children 12 years and older usually can understand that cancer causes symptoms such as feeling tired. Explain in detail how their treatment can help them and how medicines work to make them eventually feel better.

Children with cancer may have a lot of questions about their illness but might be afraid to ask. Talk to your child's doctor and make sure you understand the treatment and side effects from the beginning so you can explain these to your child. Provide lots of love and support and answer questions honestly.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- National Cancer Institute
800/422-6237
www.nci.nih.gov
- American Cancer Society
800/227-2345
www.cancer.org
- Candlelighters Childhood Cancer Foundation
800/366-2223
www.candlelighters.org

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page Index on JAMA's Web site at www.jama.com. A Patient Page on leukemia was published in the August 22/29, 2001, issue and one on lymphoma was published in the April 11, 2001, issue.

Sources: American Cancer Society, Candlelighters Childhood Cancer Foundation, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Cancer Institute, Nemours Foundation

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