

Talking With Your Children

First thought — my children

You have just learned that you have breast cancer. Some of your first thoughts may be about your children. What is going through your mind? Fear...fear of the unknown...so much is unknown. Should you tell them? What should you tell them? What if they ask you if you are going to die? What will you say? What if you are not around to see them as they grow? There is nothing unusual about having these thoughts or any others that might go through your mind.

When something threatens your life, your family is threatened. And your instinct is to protect your family, especially your children. You want to protect them from hearing “bad” news, and preserve their innocence. Talking to your doctor, nurse or a social worker can help you decide what to say. In the end, you know your children best. You are the best person to decide how and when to tell your children about your cancer.

Your child's perspective

You are the anchor of your child's world. And now the anchor is threatened. However you decide to tell your children, be as honest and open as possible — no matter how difficult it may seem. You decide how much you want to say. Remember that children, just like adults, will fill in wherever you leave big gaps. And because children may not know as much as adults, it is more likely that what they fill the gaps with will be wrong.

Encourage your children to talk to you and to ask questions. Giving honest, realistic answers to their questions will help lessen their fears. If you are going to be gone for a few days, if you are getting sick from the treatment, if you are losing hair or a breast, let your children know why all this is happening. Anything that changes their daily routine needs to be explained.

It is a good idea to let your children's teachers know about what you are going through — especially for younger children. The teachers may help the children cope if they spend most of the day at school.

Finally, just as your children depend on you, you can depend on them too. They can be, and probably want to be, a source of support for you. They will want to listen to you, hug you, kiss you and spend time with you. Let them.



Have I done anything to my daughter? Resources

While there can be a genetic component to some breast cancer, in the U.S. only about 5 to 10 percent breast cancer is inherited. Having a mother with breast cancer increases a daughter's chances of developing breast cancer. However, just because you have breast cancer does not mean that your daughter will develop breast cancer also.



Talk to your daughter about her concerns. Allow her to ask questions. If you cannot answer them, it is okay to say, "I don't know the answer right now, but I'll find out." Members of your health care team can also help you.

Talk to your daughter about getting to know the normal look and feel of her breasts. Breast self-exam (BSE) is a tool that can be used to learn what is normal (for step-by-step BSE instructions, visit www.komen.org/bse). Women under age 40 with either a family history of breast cancer or other concerns about their personal risk should talk with their health care provider about when to start getting mammograms or other tests, such as breast MRI, and how often to have them. Women at higher risk may need to get screened earlier and more frequently than usually recommended. She can also discuss risk assessment and her options for lowering her risk for breast cancer with her doctor.

Chances are a member of your health care team has told you about support groups that you may join. You can always discuss talking to your children with other survivors who have children. Start by calling any of the following organizations:

Organizations

Susan G. Komen for the Cure®

1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636),
www.komen.org

American Cancer Society's Reach to Recovery Program
1-800-ACS-2345, www.cancer.org

Breast Cancer Network of Strength
1-800-221-2141 (English), 1-800-986-9505 (Spanish)
www.networkofstrength.org

Gilda's Club
1-888-GILDA-4-U, www.gildasclub.com

Kids Cope
1-404-892-1437, www.kidscope.org

Kids Konnected
1-800-899-2866, www.kidskonnected.org

Young Survival Coalition
1-212-206-6610, www.youngsurvival.org

Books

The Hope Tree – Kids Talk About Breast Cancer by Laura Numeroff and Wendy S. Harpham, M.D. 2008.
1-877 GO KOMEN, www.komen.org

What's happening to mom? by Susan G. Komen for the Cure, 2008. 1-877 GO KOMEN, www.komen.org

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Health Resources
- Getting the Support You Need
- Young Women & Breast Cancer