



TEENS

with a blood
cancer

GETTING A BLOOD CANCER diagnosis while you are still young can be scary, but you are not alone. Know that there are treatments that work. We know more about how to treat blood cancers in young people today than ever before. As a teenager, you are still developing physically, emotionally and intellectually and the effects of cancer will be different for you now than if you had cancer when you were a child or when you are an adult. You will likely face a number of challenges specific to your age group so it is important that you and your parents are informed so that you can be better prepared for what's ahead. Getting information about your diagnosis and treatment will help you regain a feeling of control and help to decrease any fear or anxiety you might have.



Sharing your diagnosis

Telling people about your diagnosis is a very personal decision. You may want to tell only close family members and friends. Or you may find that it helps to let more people know about your diagnosis, such as classmates or teammates. Only you and your parents can choose what is best for you.

By letting your friends and family know about your diagnosis, they will have an opportunity to offer their support. Take some time to decide what information and details related to your cancer experience you want to share. Talk to your parents about it. When getting ready to tell someone about your cancer experience it may help to practice what you want to say and prepare answers to questions they may have. Expect their reactions to be different from one person to another. Some people may not know what to say or do, but most will be supportive.

Social media

You may be thinking about sharing your cancer experience with others through social media. Maybe you want to express your feelings—good or bad—along the way, gain encouragement and empathy from those in your social network or have a place to document this major life event. Whatever your reason, take time to think it over.

Questions you should first ask yourself

- Would it affect me if an important person, like a potential employer or partner, learned about my diagnosis from a Web search?
- Would it upset me to look back on my cancer experience in the future through my social feed?
- Can this information be taken down in the future, if I choose to?
- Exactly who can see or use this information on social media?

Always check your privacy settings first. Remember that anything shared online may be less private than you think. You may want to consider using group email or a private website to share updates with only a select number of people. If you decide not to share your diagnosis online, ask your friends and family to also respect your privacy and to do the same.



Activities with friends and family

Once you are diagnosed, your daily routine will change. How much changes will depend on the course of treatment you need to follow and how well you feel.

Going through cancer treatment may not always mean stopping everything you used to enjoy all at once. At some point in your treatment, it may be more difficult for you to see your friends or other family members who don't live with you. Activities like playing sports, hanging out, or even going to the restaurant may be off-limits. Once you are considered healthy enough to have contact with others outside your household and you feel you have the energy to take part, you can resume those activities. At other times during your treatment, you may still be able to take part in activities that you used to do with friends and family, but in a different way or only at certain times.

It is common to feel frustrated about those changes, but know that this is temporary. You may find it helps to talk to your friends and family about what you can and can't do, or what you feel or don't feel like doing, so they can better understand your situation. Being open with them can avoid a lot of frustration for both you and them.



School and work

Most teenagers with a blood cancer will recover and resume some or all of the activities they enjoyed before their diagnosis. For this reason, some teens continue to go to school or to work throughout or soon after cancer treatment, if they can. Talk to your parents and to your healthcare team to decide what is best for you.

Students in middle or high school

You may need to miss some of your school year or continue doing school work from home or from the hospital. You and your parents should speak with the school's administration to discuss your options and what would work best for you. Your healthcare team is there to support you through your education. Your school administrators and teachers will also help you once you are ready to return to ensure a smooth transition back to school.

Students in post-secondary programs

If you are a post-secondary student, speak with your university or college to see what their policy is if you need to miss classes or even a whole semester. If you have student loans you should contact your student loan provider to see if they can defer payment while you are in treatment. Once you return to school, you may want to speak with the administrators or your professors about any accommodations you may need to ease your transition back to class.

Work

If you are currently working part-time or full-time, you may need to limit your availability or take a leave of absence. If you need to stop working, you may have the right to take medical leave under your employer's policies. Speak with your employer to find out if you can take a leave of absence while you are away.



Dealing with your emotions

You may be feeling scared, anxious, and stressed right now. All of those feelings are a natural reaction after you get a cancer diagnosis. If these feelings become overwhelming or unbearable, it is important that you speak with a member of your healthcare team. Social workers and psychologists are available as part of your cancer care team. You might find it helpful to connect with someone your own age who has gone through a similar blood cancer experience.

Changes to your body

As part of your treatment, your body may experience physical changes. You may feel self-conscious about those changes such as hair loss, weight changes, swelling, scars, or having a PICC line or Hickman line inserted. Remember that most or all of these changes are only temporary.



Dating and sexual health

You may be wondering how cancer or the treatments will affect your current or future romantic relationships and sexuality. For example, will it be safe for me to see my partner during my treatment? Will my partner want to be with me even if I lose my hair or have scars? Will I have any energy or interest to engage in sexual activity?

Answers to these and other questions is different for everyone because no two blood cancer experiences are exactly alike. What may be safe or possible for another person with cancer may not be for you or vice versa.

If you are continuing to have, or are starting a new, sexual relationship while in treatment, the best thing to do is to speak with your healthcare team. There may be a wait period or some precautions you will need to take before continuing or starting your relationship. There are also risks associated with sexual intercourse, such as exposing your partner to chemotherapy, that will need to be discussed. It is important that if you are sexually active that you always use condoms to protect against sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unwanted pregnancy. Speak with your healthcare team about which forms of birth control are right for you.

Telling your partner

Cancer can be difficult on everyone affected by the diagnosis. Deciding to tell your partner about your diagnosis is your decision. There is no right or wrong answer. If you are already in a relationship, even a new one, your diagnosis may bring about some positive and negative reactions or feelings between you and your partner.

Each person reacts to cancer differently. Your partner may be understanding and become your strongest support. Your partner may also have a difficult time coping. Expect that your relationship may change over the course of your experience with cancer. If you are concerned about your relationship during your experience with cancer, talk to your healthcare team and ask about any resources or supports available.

Long-term and late effects

Treatment for your blood cancer may include chemotherapy, other drug therapies, radiation, and a stem cell transplant. These treatments can be very effective but they also come with risks of long term effects (medical problems that continue for months or years after treatment ends) and late effects (medical problems that do not develop or become apparent until years after treatment ends) that may pose challenges as you get older.

Possible health risks of treatment

- problems learning
- fatigue
- bone or joint pain
- increased risk for developing a secondary cancer later on in life

These health challenges may begin during or shortly after treatment, or later on in life. Early intervention and healthy lifestyle practices (not smoking, good nutrition, exercise, regular screenings and follow-up) can help reduce the risks of and severity. Talk to your healthcare team about possible long-term and late effects.

Fertility

Your ability to have children (fertility) in the future may also be affected by cancer treatment. Even though you may not be thinking about having children anytime soon, it's best to speak with your healthcare team about your options if you do decide to have children in the future.

Life after cancer

When your treatment is over, you may have a number of different emotions. It is possible that you will feel happiness and excitement about completing your course of treatment, but also anxiety and fear about the future and what comes next. It is normal to need support even after treatment and it is important to reach out to family, friends, and your healthcare team.



Visit bloodcancers.ca for more information and resources specific to teenagers experiencing a blood cancer. You can also contact us to speak with a Community Services Manager who can help you understand or find the information or support for your in your region.

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Never hesitate to contact us, we're here to help!

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