

Supporting your young adult children when you have cancer



This Information Sheet discusses how to talk to young adults about your cancer diagnosis, how to support them, and where they can find support when they live away from home.

Young adults are starting to live a much more independent life. When a parent is diagnosed with cancer, it presents a whole lot of new and difficult challenges.

They may be getting ready to leave or have left home for a new job or study. Parents don't want to burden them with the news. They are tempted to 'lessen the load', use euphemisms and half-truths to make the telling easier.

Talking to young adults about your cancer

- Choose a quiet time and place.
- Be open and honest.
- Tell them what you know and listen to their responses.
- Ask them if they want to come to the doctor with you.
- Encourage them to ask questions.
- Remind them they are important and loved.
- Hugs are still good.
- Having told them the news, let them have privacy and let them come back to you when they are ready.
- Reassure them that you'll keep them updated.

Young people can be unpredictable in their response. They may be uncomfortable about their thoughts and feelings about your cancer. Some young adults become anxious and feel they need to move back home to care for you.

Some may withdraw from you and have very little contact. Others may indulge in risk-taking behaviour. Give them room to react without judgement. Let them know that you still care about their safety. Try to keep an eye on them and ask a friend or family member to act as their mentor and supporter.

If they are living at home, let them know that the old rules still apply and that they might need to help more, for example, with shopping, housework and cooking.

Let them know what support you have, such as the district nurse coming around. Encourage them to keep up their usual activities, social life and studies or job. Tell them how much you appreciate contact with them.

Young people need privacy. They may or may not wish to talk to their family. However, it's important to let them know they can talk with others, such as a friend, another member of the family or a counsellor.

When they are living away from home

Encourage them to seek help and support where they are living, for example, by contacting the local Cancer Society (NZ) / Cancer Council Australia, Student Health Centre or Employment Assistance Programme for counselling.

Keep in contact regularly by email, skype, or text. Reassure them that you will keep them well-informed about what's going on.

Practical resources

Cancer Information Helpline 0800 CANCER (226 237)

Cancer Council Australia Helpline 131120

CancerChatNZ www.cancerchatnz.org.nz