

Can I Catch Cancer?

And other frequently asked questions by kids



Photos courtesy of Leigh Tynan Studios

Most children have been touched by cancer, either at home or in the classroom*, and what they think they know about the disease is frightening and/or incorrect. Kids need to be assured that their risk of developing cancer is rare and that most children survive. Talking openly about the illness reduces fears and encourages discussion about citizenship and helping others in need. Below are a few of the questions POGO Interlink Nurses address on a regular basis when talking to kids.

What is cancer?

Cancer, although we use just one word, is not one illness but many. There are actually over 200 different types of cancer, and you can get cancer in any part of the body including blood, bones, muscles and other body organs. The body is made up of billions of cells that can only be seen under a microscope. Cancer occurs when the cells in the body begin to grow very fast. Normal cells grow in an orderly style but cancer cells grow out of control and continue to grow and crowd out normal ones. These abnormal cells can clump together to form a tumour.

Can I catch cancer from my friend?

Cancer is not contagious. You do not need to be afraid to be around someone with cancer.

Did Johnny do anything wrong to get cancer?

No – it is not his fault. No one knows exactly why some people get cancer and others don't.

Do kids always die from cancer?

Many kids fully recover. Early diagnosis and more successful treatments help them get better.

What are the doctors doing to help Mandy get better?

The types of treatment used most often to treat cancer are surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy. Doctors use these treatments to destroy the cancer cells. Depending on the type of cancer, children may have one kind of treatment or a combination of treatments.

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is medicine used to stop cancer cells from growing. The medicine can be taken by mouth or injected with a needle. The medicine is carried through the blood and absorbed to kill cancer cells. Different cancer cells respond to different drugs.

What is radiation like?

A special machine uses strong energy beamed directly into the cancer site to shrink the tumour. It does not hurt when you are getting radiation.

Do you always lose your hair when you have cancer?

No. This depends on the treatment. Cancer cells divide very quickly, just like our hair cells, so when you receive chemotherapy and/or radiation, it destroys cancer cells and hair cells along with it. Hair nearly always grows back, often thicker and better than before treatment started.

How long do children stay in the hospital and who stays with them?

Sometimes children may have to stay in the hospital for days, weeks or even months. In many cases, children are able to get their treatments and go home at the end of the day. Whether they are in the hospital for just a few hours or if they have to stay overnight, parents can stay with their kids the whole time.

Can Amir come back to school while he has cancer?

He may have to miss some days because he is getting treatment or because he doesn't feel well or strong enough. Some children can't go to school but they can keep up with their homework by having a teacher come to their house or by working with a teacher at the hospital.

How will I know if I have cancer?

Usually someone with cancer has been sick for a quite a while. The doctor will do lots of tests, like blood tests and scans that take pictures of the inside of your body, to find out what is wrong.

What can we do so we don't get cancer?

There are some things you can do to help you have a smaller chance of getting cancer when you are a grown up. Protect yourself from the sun with a hat and sunscreen, don't smoke, eat healthy foods, including lots of vegetables, and exercise. You also should get regular check-ups from your doctor. All of these things will keep you healthy in lots of ways.

What can I do to help Suzy when she is in treatment?

Remember, even though Suzy might look different, she is still the same person and needs your support. Keep in touch by sending her cards or emails and visit if possible. To protect her, do not visit when you are feeling sick and use good hand washing techniques to reduce the spread of germs. If you develop chicken pox, report this to your teacher immediately because Suzy will need to receive special treatment to prevent her from getting even more sick.

What can we do to help kids who have cancer?

One way you can help is to raise awareness about childhood cancer in your school. You can do a POGO Chalk Drawing Day during Childhood Cancer Awareness Month which takes place in September, or you can raise money with an event at your school or in your neighbourhood and make a donation to a children's cancer charity. Every bit helps.

* Statistics show that over 400 children in Ontario get cancer each year and there are nearly 4,000 children receiving cancer treatment or follow up care at any given time.

POGO Interlink Nurses provide excellent nursing support to the young cancer patient and help families identify useful resources and services in the community, including POGO's financial assistance program. Interlink Nurses also work with schools to educate and support faculty about the special needs of the ill child and facilitate the child's return to the classroom. Class presentations using puppets and other props help students understand what a cancer diagnosis is and what it is not. These presentations are often extended to the siblings' classes because their experience can be complex and difficult as well. Preparing students for the young patient's re-entry into school can go a long way in enhancing his or her recovery.

