

“Ask the Doctor”

Featuring Erika Rager, M.D., Indiana University Melvin and Bren Simon Cancer Center

Q: How should I talk to my children about my cancer diagnosis?

A: Talking to children about cancer is challenging, yet necessary. The sooner we establish open and thoughtful communication, the greater support we can offer to help them process their own reactions and experiences.

Often our first adult reaction is to protect them from sensitive situations, but children are very attuned to how adults deal with extreme news. It’s better for your children to hear about your diagnosis from you or someone else in the family, rather than at a play group, school or neighbor’s home. Provide information in small doses at first, then let them ask questions, always assuring them that you will tell them the truth.

Consider their temperament, age, and relationship with siblings. Some families may benefit from a “group meeting” to provide a sense of solidarity; in other families, individual discussions may be needed for immediate emotional concerns. Encourage the children to talk about their feelings toward the cancer information.

Communication is a vital tool to help children’s upset, worry and fear, all normal reactions. Children often assume the worst: did they do something wrong? Will they “catch” cancer? If you get cancer, doesn’t it mean you’re going to die?

Aspects about the cancer diagnosis to consider sharing:

- The name of the cancer and what part of your body is affected
- The treatment for that cancer and how long treatment may take
- The way the child’s life may be affected and any changes in routine

For more resources, visit the American Cancer Society at www.cancer.org or the CompleteLife program of IU Simon Cancer Center at www.cancer.iu.edu

Dr. Erika Rager is a surgeon with the Breast Care and Research Center affiliated with the Indiana University Melvin and Bren Simon Cancer Center. For more information on cancer topics, visit cancer.iu.edu