

# Answering your questions about your friend's illness

## Factsheet for children and young people

Finding out your friend has cancer may have left you feeling worried. You probably have lots of questions and things that you're wondering about. And you may not be sure who to ask or what you can do to help them.

This information sheet aims to answer some of the most common questions about how cancer affects children and young people. We hope it helps you understand what's happening to your friend and how you can support them.



### What is cancer?

Our bodies are made up of millions of cells, which make the things our bodies need, like blood, muscle and bone. These cells are always dividing to make new ones. This helps us grow and develop, or they just replace older cells that have worn out. Sometimes when they divide, something goes wrong and the new cell doesn't behave properly. Normally when this happens the cell destroys itself.

Sometimes though, these cells survive and get out of control. They carry on dividing themselves into more cells that do not behave properly and have the ability to spread to other parts of the body. This is called cancer.

Your friend may have leukaemia or a tumour:

- Leukaemia happens when some of the blood cells do not work properly and keep dividing into more cells that don't behave properly
- Solid cancers (or tumours) happen when the damaged cells form a lump – on a bone, in a muscle or in a lymph node for instance.

### What causes cancer?

Children and young people very rarely get cancer, and very little is known about what causes childhood cancer.

The types of cancer that children and young people get are mostly different to those that affect adults.

### Can I catch cancer?

No. Cancer can't be passed on, like a cold or 'flu' can. You can spend as much time with your friend as you want – it won't give you cancer.



### Is my friend going to be okay?

Everyone with cancer reacts differently to treatment, but the kind of cancers that affect children and young people usually respond well to treatment, and most get better.

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### How is cancer treated?

There are three main types of treatment for cancer – chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery. Your friend may be having one of these, or a combination.

**Chemotherapy** is a medicine treatment that kills cancer cells. The medicines used in chemotherapy are very strong. They may be given to your friend as a tablet, liquid medicine, injection or through a drip.

**Radiotherapy** is a type of high-energy X-ray. It kills cancer cells in the part of the body where the cancer is, while doing as little harm as possible to other cells.

**Surgery** means having an operation in hospital. If your friend has a lump or tumour they may need a small operation called a biopsy first. That's when the doctors take out a small piece of the tumour to find out more about it and decide how to treat it.



Treatment for cancer can last a long time – sometimes two or three years. Children and young people with cancer are usually treated in hospital. Your friend may be in and out of hospital, possibly for long periods.

### Do these treatments hurt?

These treatments don't hurt, but they're not very nice.

- Chemotherapy and radiotherapy may cause side effects, like sore skin, sickness, tiredness or hair loss
- If your friend needs surgery they will have a general anaesthetic. They will probably be given painkillers afterwards
- If they are having chemotherapy, they may receive their treatment through a 'portacath' or 'central line' (see section later). This allows medicine to be put into their bloodstream. It means they don't have to have as many injections
- If they're having radiotherapy, they will have to keep totally still for a few minutes while the treatment is given.



The doctors and nurses will be making sure that your friend gets the best type of treatment for them, and that any side effects are handled as well as possible.

### What is it like in hospital?

Your friend may spend long periods of time in hospital while they are on treatment. They will be able to do lots of normal things there, like watching television, using computers and playing video games. Most hospitals will have a schoolroom, to help children and young people keep up to date with school work. Some schoolrooms provide Skype too.

### When will my friend get better?

Your friend's recovery will depend on the kind of cancer they have, how serious it is, the treatment they need and how they react to it. Everyone is different, and your friend will react to cancer and treatment in their own individual way.

Even if they fully recover from the actual cancer quite quickly, it may take a while before they get back to their usual self.



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### Why does my friend look different?

If your friend has lost or put on weight, or lost their hair, this isn't because of the cancer – it's because of the treatment.

Chemotherapy and radiotherapy kill more than just the cancer cells. They also destroy other fast-growing cells, such as their hair cells. This is why your friend's hair may fall out. Once treatment is finished, hair usually grows back.

Some treatments can also affect a child or young person's weight. Their nurses and doctors will be helping them to manage this.

You may have noticed that your friend simply looks more tired or pale than usual. Cancer treatment can be tough. Just being there to listen and offer support can help your friend through this time.

### There's a thin tube going into my friend's body – what's it for?

Your friend may need to take lots of different medicines, and to have blood tests taken. If this is the case, the doctor may have given them a 'central line', which is a small tube inserted into their chest with the end just outside the skin. The line is used to give treatment through, and for taking blood tests.

Having a line isn't painful, though it means your friend needs to be careful. They may not be able to go swimming or do contact sports like football and rugby.

### My friend has a tube going up their nose – what's it for?

If your friend's cancer or treatment is making it difficult for them to eat or drink, they may have a NG (nasogastric) tube so they can have liquid food. Liquid medicines can also be given through the tube.

### Why don't I see my friend as often?

Sometimes your friend may feel weak, sick or tired from the effects of their treatment. They may not feel up to going to school. Or they might come into school part-time, or on the days or weeks in-between their treatment sessions.

Children and young people with cancer tell us that going to school is very important as it helps keep things feeling normal.

Sometimes your friend might not want to have visitors at home or in hospital. This might be because they are tired or feeling poorly. You might like to show them you're thinking of them by sending them a card, text or email. Young people often tell us that hearing from friends really helps.



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### Why is my friend eating so much?

If your friend is taking steroids, a type of medicine used to treat some cancers, they may feel hungrier than usual. They may sometimes need snacks in class, or at other times, to fill them up.



### What can I do to help my friend?

There's a lot you can do to support your friend during their illness. You can learn about your friend's cancer, keep in touch during their treatment, and listen when they want to talk. This will help you understand what they are going through – and how you can help them.

However, don't feel like you have to talk about their illness all the time. Your friend is still the same person they were before, and some days they may not want to think about it and get on with the things you both like doing best.

### Do you have more questions, or need some help?

There are lots of booklets and leaflets available which can help you understand more about childhood cancer. These can be ordered free of charge from our website at [www.clicsargent.org.uk](http://www.clicsargent.org.uk) so ask your parent or carer to order one for you, or have a look at the list with them.

If you are worried about your friend, please speak to your parents, or a trusted adult so they can help you.

### About CLIC Sargent

CLIC Sargent is the UK's leading cancer charity for children and young people, and their families. We provide clinical, practical and emotional support to help children and young people cope with cancer and get the most out of life.

[www.clicsargent.org.uk](http://www.clicsargent.org.uk)

Please note that everyone's experience is different and may not follow the order outlined in this resource, and that services will differ across the UK.

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