

Emotional Impact of Cancer

A diagnosis of cancer and the experience of hospitalization can be a traumatic event for children and adolescents, as well as their adult caregivers. While many children do not experience any long-term emotional impacts of their experience, most if not all patients and their caregivers will experience some emotional change at least temporarily.

During and after hospitalization and/or medical appointments, you might see:

- Behavioral changes (aggression, anger outbursts, restlessness, loss of interest in play)
- Mood changes (irritability, tearfulness)
- Anxiety or worry
- New and/or excessive fears (fear of medical providers, fear of certain foods, fear of medications)
- Fears of separating from caregiver, or changes in comfort seeking behaviors
- Difficulties sleeping (nightmares, jerky movements during sleep, frequent awakenings)
- Regression in past milestones (will no longer sleep in own bed, no longer potty trained)

These are expected responses to a new and stressful situation and can occur regardless of how your child was previously functioning. While these symptoms are expected, they should not be ignored.

What should you do?

- Establish structure in daily routine while in the hospital. This will improve predictability and decrease fears or worries
- Be consistent with expectations, limit setting, and consequences for misbehavior in the same way you normally would
- Be open to discuss your child's diagnosis, treatment, and any associated emotions with them using developmentally appropriate language
- Encourage independence when possible to help regain confidence and sense of safety
- Remind your child that nothing they or anyone else did has led to their diagnosis or hospitalization
- Whenever possible, do NOT allow your child to delay medical interventions even if they are uncomfortable or scary. Delays or avoidance of necessary medical care can be dangerous and worsens fear over time.
- Return to your regular routine as much as possible

Psychology is an integrated part of your child's treatment team. Psychology will always attempt to meet with patients and their families during hospital admissions, and is available for consultation during oncology clinic visits. Whenever you have concerns about your child, please let someone from the medical team know and they will contact Psychology.