



Can I catch cancer?

AND OTHER FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS BY KIDS

Many children know someone who has had cancer, either in their family, community or classroom.* What they think they know about the disease may be 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 empathy 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 cannot catch it from someone. You do not need to be afraid to be around someone with cancer.

Did my friend do anything wrong to get cancer? No – it is not your friend's fault. No one knows exactly why some people get cancer and others don't.

Do kids always die from cancer? No, most kids are cured of their cancer. Early diagnosis and treatments help kids get better.

What is the hospital doing to help my friend get better? The types of treatment used to treat cancer are surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy and other medicines. These treatments are used 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 given in different ways, including by mouth, into a vein or through a long, thin tube called a central venous line. The medicine is carried through the blood and absorbed to kill cancer cells.

What is radiation treatment? A special machine gives a powerful, invisible beam of energy to kill the cancer cells. It is similar to a sunbeam; you can't see it and it does not hurt.

Do you always lose your hair when you have cancer? Not always. It depends on the treatment. If treatment causes hair to fall out, it usually grows back. Cancer does not cause hair loss; it's the treatment that does.

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 my friend come back to school while they have cancer? Your friend may have to miss some days because they are getting treatment or because they don't feel well. 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 feels sick or unwell and needs to be seen by their doctor or visit the hospital. 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?

We don't understand why some children 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 should also 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 my friend when they are in treatment?

Remember, even though your friend might look different, they are still the same person and need your support. Keep in touch by sending cards or emails and visit if possible. To protect your friend, do not visit when you are feeling sick and use good handwashing practices to reduce the spread of germs.

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 also raise money for POGO with an event at your school or in your neighbourhood. Every bit helps.

* Statistics show that there are about 500 children and youth diagnosed with cancer in a pediatric cancer program in Ontario each year and there are over 4,000 families in Ontario with a child in cancer treatment or follow-up care each year.

POGO Interlink Nurses provide excellent nursing support to the young cancer patient and help families identify useful resources and services in the community, including the POGO Financial Assistance Program. POGO Interlink Nurses also work with schools to provide support and educate faculty about the special needs of the ill child and help with the child's return to the classroom. Class presentations using medical dolls and other props help students understand what a cancer diagnosis is and what it is not. These presentations are often also made in 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 improving that child's recovery.