

# Supporting young adult children when you have cancer



**This information discusses how to talk to young adults about your cancer diagnosis, how to support them, and where they can find support when they live away from home.**

When a parent or caregiver is diagnosed with cancer, it can present a whole lot of new and difficult challenges for their young adult children. They may be getting ready to leave or have left home for a new job or study. Parents don't want to burden them with the news. They are tempted to 'lessen the load', be vague and not tell the whole truth to make the conversation easier.

## Talking to young adults about your cancer

The following tips may be helpful when talking to young adults about your cancer.

- Choose a quiet time and place.
- Be open and honest.
- Tell them what you know and listen to their responses.
- Let them know that they can come to the doctor with you, if you feel comfortable with this.
- Encourage them to ask questions.
- Remind them they are important and loved.
- Hug them.
- Having told them the news, let them have privacy and let them come back to you when they are ready.
- Reassure them that you'll keep them updated.
- Ask if they have any questions or concerns.

Young people can be unpredictable in their response. They may be uncomfortable about their thoughts and feelings about your cancer. Some young adults become anxious and feel they need to move back home to care for you. It's important to let them know what support you would like.

Some may withdraw from you and have very little contact. Others may indulge in risk-taking behaviour, such as drinking too much alcohol and/or taking drugs. Give them room to react without judgement. Let them know that you still care about their safety. Try to keep an eye on them and ask a friend or family member to look out for them.

If they are living at home, let them know that the old rules still apply and that they might need to help more (for example, with shopping, housework and cooking).

Let them know what support you have, such as the district nurse coming around. Encourage them to keep up their usual activities, social life and studies or job. Tell them how much you appreciate contact with them.

Young people need privacy. They may or may not wish to talk to their family. However, it's important to let them know they can talk with others, such as a friend, another member of the family or a counsellor.

## When they are living away from home

Encourage them to seek help and support where they live (for example, by contacting their local Cancer Society/Cancer Council Australia, Student Health Centre or Employment Assistance Programme for counselling).

Keep in contact regularly by phone or text, social media, email or Skype. Reassure them that you will keep them well-informed about what's going on.

## Practical resources

Cancer Information Helpline **0800 CANCER (226 237)**

Cancer Society website [www.cancernz.org.nz](http://www.cancernz.org.nz)

Cancer Council Australia Helpline 13 11 20

CancerChatNZ [www.cancerchatnz.org.nz](http://www.cancerchatnz.org.nz)

Canteen Offspring Programme