

## Does a child in your class have cancer?

### Here's how to... talk to their classmates

If someone in the class has cancer, it will be a confusing and anxious time for everyone at your school. It's likely that pupils will have lots of questions. If you can talk to them about cancer, it will help dispel any myths and avoid fear and confusion.

CLIC Sargent can help you with:

- Approaching the subject.
- Suggestions of topics you may want to discuss.
- Ideas for opening up discussion.

You could introduce this during PSHE, and bring up the discussion points in circle time.

**Please note:** it is important that you speak to the parents of the ill child *before* you speak with the child him/herself or their fellow pupils.

### Start by reassuring

Cancer in children is very rare. No one knows for sure how children get cancer, but it's not something that you 'catch' and it hasn't been caused by anything they have said or done (this is especially important for siblings).

*To emphasise this, you might want to ask children to think of an illness that they can catch from one of their friends (eg colds, flu, chickenpox). Then ask them to think of illnesses that can't be caught from someone else (eg asthma, a broken leg).*

Pass on the good news that scientists are carrying out research to find out more about cancer and how to treat it. Because of research carried out over the last 30 years, 75% of children who get cancer now survive.



Call the FREE Child Cancer Helpline  
**0800-197-0068**  
9am - 5pm Monday to Friday

[www.clicsargent.org.uk](http://www.clicsargent.org.uk)  
Registered charity number 1107328

**CLIC Sargent**  
  
Caring for Children with Cancer

## What is cancer?

You can explain how your body is made up of millions of cells that do different jobs and behave in different ways. Usually cells divide to make new healthy cells. Cancer happens when an unhealthy cell is made and divides and grows faster than the healthy cells.

Without treatment, the number of unhealthy cells grow and can spread to other parts of the body.

## Types of cancer

Cancer cells can group together to form a lump or tumour. Or blood cells can divide and create unhealthy cancer cells, and this is called leukaemia or lymphoma.

There are over 200 different types of cancer, but the most common in children and young people are leukaemia and brain tumours.

These are not like adult cancers, they behave differently and respond more positively to treatment (as the survival rate proves).

## Treatment

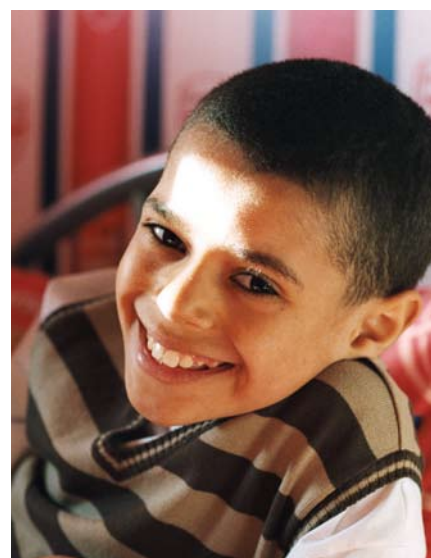
When a child has cancer or leukaemia, they may have to spend a lot of time in hospital having treatment. The three main types of treatment are:

- chemotherapy (drug treatment).
- radiotherapy (x-ray treatment).
- surgery (an operation, if the tumour is solid).

During chemotherapy, a combination of drugs goes into the bloodstream, attacking the unhealthy cells as it flows around your body. But the drugs affect the healthy cells too. This can make the ill child feel tired and sick and may also cause their hair to fall out. They may also lose or gain a lot of weight.

During radiotherapy high-energy rays are targeted at the cancer cells, avoiding the healthy cells. It is not painful and each session lasts for a few minutes. It is a bit like having an x-ray. But it can make the child tired and sick too.

A child may have one type of treatment or a mixture, whichever is best to treat the type of cancer they have. It is important to emphasise to the other children in the class that even though their friend might look different, they are still the same person inside.



## Tips to aid discussion

- Ask children how they feel when they are ill (eg frightened, bored, sad) to help them understand how their classmate may be feeling.
- If you have a child in your class currently receiving treatment, encourage children to think of things they could do to cheer their friend up (eg send a card, make a picture from the whole class).
- Hospitals can be boring and children will miss school and their friends. Ask children how they think they can make their classmate still feel involved in school (eg sending a diary of what's been happening in class or sending pictures of activities).

## Other help from CLIC Sargent

- CLIC Sargent produces a range of storybooks – *Mary Has a Brain Tumour*, *Joe Has Leukaemia* and *Lucy Has a Tumour* – which help explain children's cancer to children.
- CLIC Sargent's booklet *Chemotherapy, Cakes and Cancer* is an A-Z of coping with cancer treatment, through the eyes of a 14 year-old girl.

All these are available free of charge from CLIC Sargent, and are available to order or download now from our website [www.clicsargent.org.uk](http://www.clicsargent.org.uk). For information, support and teaching resources, please contact our free helpline, **Child Cancer Helpline** on **0800 197 0068** or [helpline@clicsargent.org.uk](mailto:helpline@clicsargent.org.uk).

As the UK's leading children's cancer charity, CLIC Sargent is here for everyone who needs support and information about childhood cancer. So please get in touch, we will be happy to help you.

## Other factsheets in this series:

*Returning to School: Primary school children with cancer*  
*Returning to School: Young people with cancer*



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