

Answering your questions about your friend's illness

Of course you want to support and help your friend through their time with cancer, but you may also be feeling worried, confused and scared. You probably have lots of questions, but you may be reluctant to bother your friend with them, or they may not feel up to answering you in much detail.

This factsheet gives answers to some of the most common questions, to help you understand what's happening to your friend, and let you know where to get hold of more information.

What exactly is cancer?

Your friend's body (just like yours) is made up of millions of cells, which divide to create new healthy cells. Sometimes, however, they produce an abnormal cell, and this can sometimes cause cancer. Cancer cells divide and grow faster than healthy cells, so if they're not treated, the abnormal cells will grow and can spread to other parts of the body.

Your friend may have leukaemia or a tumour:

- **Leukaemia** and lymphoma happens when the cells in someone's blood divide and multiply abnormally
- **Solid cancers** (or tumours) happen when a lump forms — on a bone, for instance.

What causes cancer in young people?

Nobody really knows. There are lots of theories about what causes cancer, but you can be absolutely sure that nothing your friend did (or didn't do) caused their illness.

Can I catch cancer from my friend?

No. We don't know what causes cancer but we do know it's not contagious. You can spend as much time with your friend as you want and touch or hug them if you have that kind of relationship – it won't give you cancer.

Is my friend going to die?

You may have had an older relative who died of cancer, but that doesn't mean your friend will die. Everyone with cancer responds differently to treatment, but the kind of cancers that affect young people usually respond positively to treatment, and most children or young people who get cancer do survive.

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is the drug treatments used to fight cancer and destroy the abnormal cells. It needs to be very strong to do this. These drugs may be given to your friend as a pill, medicine, injections or a drip.

What other treatments might my friend be having?

Depending on the type of cancer they have, your friend may need radiotherapy or surgery.

Radiotherapy means zapping the cancer cells with radiation or high energy rays. It's a bit like having an X-ray taken.

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

Do these treatments hurt?

No, but they can be very unpleasant.

- Chemotherapy and radiotherapy may have side effects, including sore skin, sickness, diarrhoea, tiredness or hair loss.
- If your friend needs surgery they will have a general anaesthetic and probably be given painkillers afterwards. This means they could feel a bit disoriented and woozy for a while.

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- If they're on chemotherapy, they may receive their drugs through a 'portacath' or 'central line', which transports the treatment directly into their bloodstream and avoids the need for lots of injections.
- If they're having radiotherapy, they will have to keep still for a few minutes — this may be difficult but it's not painful.

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 managed as well as possible.

When will my friend get better?

This depends on the kind of cancer, how severe it is, the treatment needed and your friend's response to it. Everyone's different, and your friend will react to cancer and treatment in their own individual way.

Even if they're fully recovered from the actual cancer quite quickly, it may take a while before they get back to 'normal'. If they've lost their hair, it may take a while to grow back. Cancer may have knocked their confidence, or affected them psychologically or emotionally in other ways and they may take a while to get back to being their usual self. Some young people tell us they feel stronger for having come through cancer.

Cancer may also have long-term effects. For instance, your friend may not be as physically active as they used to be, or they could have difficulty concentrating, or be more emotional.

Why does my friend look so different?

If your friend has become fatter or thinner, or lost their hair, this isn't because of the cancer — it's because of the treatment.

When chemotherapy and radiotherapy are destroying cancer cells, they will also destroy some of your friend's fast-growing good cells, such as their hair cells — meaning

they're hair falls out. However, the hair usually grows back once they've finished treatment — sometimes thicker and stronger than it was before.

Various treatments can also cause your friend to gain or lose weight. Their nurses and doctors are helping them to manage this, and it will be easier once they're off treatment.

You may have noticed that your friend simply looks more strained or has lost their usual sparkle. They're going through a lot right now which can also affect how they look. Try to be as supportive as you can.

Why doesn't my friend come to school/college as much?

Sometimes your friend may be weak, sick or tired from the effects of their treatment, so they don't feel up to going to school or college, or seeing people. Or they might be feeling down about what they're going through.

It's important to respect your friend's wishes because they're doing what they need to help them get better. You could always show them you care by sending them a card, text or email/Facebook message.

Why is my friend eating so much?

This is a side effect of the steroids that are used to treat some cancers. They make people feel hungrier than usual.

My teacher has asked us not to come into school if we feel poorly — why?

Because of their cancer treatment, which destroys good cells as well as cancer ones, your friend may have lost some of their immunity to germs and viruses. This means they're more likely to pick up colds and illness going around. If this happens, it can affect them more seriously than it would a normally healthy person.

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There's a plastic tube going into my friend's body — what's it for?

This is a 'portacath' or 'central line'. It's carrying chemotherapy drugs into your friend's blood stream to keep fighting the cancer all the time. Although it's quite sturdy, it's important that it doesn't get wet or knocked out, so try to be careful.

I've still got more questions — who can I talk to?

There are various helplines and websites where you can find more information. These are some of them:

- **Contact the CLIC Sargent Child Cancer Helpline** — it's free, anonymous and confidential. You can call or email them — the helpline is open Monday to Friday, 9am – 5pm. Their friendly, sympathetic, trained staff will be happy to answer your questions.
[0800 197 0068](tel:08001970068)
helpline@clicsargent.org.uk
- **Visit the CLIC Sargent website at www.clicsargent.org.uk** — it's easy to navigate and find the information you want.
- **CLIC Sargent Youth Service** — you can use our Helpline to ask for details of a youth worker near you. They can talk to you in confidence and answer your questions about cancer.