

Answering your questions about your friend's illness

Learning that your friend has cancer may have left you feeling worried, confused and scared. You want to support your friend, but you may not be sure how you can help. At the same time, you probably have lots of questions, but you may be reluctant to bother your friend with them, or you may find that your friend doesn't feel up to answering you in much detail.

This information sheet gives answers to some of the most common questions about cancer, to help you understand what's happening to your friend, and let you know where you can get the advice and support you need.

What is cancer?

Our bodies are made up of millions of cells, which usually divide to create new healthy cells. Sometimes, however, they produce an abnormal cell, and this can sometimes cause cancer. Because cancer cells divide and grow faster than healthy cells, they will grow and can spread to other parts of the body if they're not treated.

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?

There are lots of theories about what causes cancer in young people, but there isn't one definite answer. However, you can be 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?

Everyone with cancer responds differently to treatment, but the kind of cancers that affect young people usually respond positively to treatment, and most young people who get cancer do get better.

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is the drug treatments used to fight cancer and destroy the abnormal cells. These are very strong drugs that 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 targets the cancer cells with radiation or high energy rays. Having radiotherapy is 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 out a small piece of the tumour to find out more about it and decide on the best form of treatment.

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Do these treatments hurt?

These treatments don't hurt 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 for a while
- If they are 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 totally still for a few minutes while the treatment is given — 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?

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

Even if they fully recover from the actual cancer quite quickly, it may take a while before they get back to 'normal'. If they've lost their hair, for example, it may take a while to grow back. Or they might be tired, as it can take a while for some people to get their energy 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.

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. As a result of the cancer, your friend may feel differently about themselves, others or certain aspects of their lives. Such changes may not be obvious and they're not necessarily negative — some young people tell us they feel stronger for having got through cancer.

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Why does my friend look so different?

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

Unfortunately, chemotherapy and radiotherapy destroy more than just the cancer cells. They will also destroy some of your friend's other fast-growing cells, such as their hair cells — this is why their hair may fall out. However, once they've finished treatment, the hair usually grows back.

Various treatments can also affect your friend's weight. Their nurses and doctors will be helping them to manage this, and it will be easier for them to get back to their old weight once they're off the treatment.

You may have noticed that your friend simply looks more strained or has lost their usual sparkle. Just being there to listen and offer support may help your friend through this difficult time.

Why don't I see my friend as often?

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, college or work, or to having visitors. It's important to respect your friend's wishes because they're doing what they need to help them get better. If your friend is feeling down about what they're going through, you could always show them you care by sending them a card, text, email or message on Facebook.

Why is my friend eating so much?

One of the side effects of the steroids that are used to treat some cancers is that they make people feel hungrier than usual.

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

Because their cancer treatment destroys good cells as well as cancer ones, your friend may have lost some of their immunity to germs and viruses. This means they are more likely to pick up the colds and illnesses going around your school or college. These illnesses can affect them more seriously than they would a normally healthy person.

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

This is a 'portacath' or 'central line'. Although the tube is quite sturdy, it's important that it doesn't get wet or knocked out, because it carries treatment into your friend's blood stream to help them fight the cancer.



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What can I do to help my friend?

There's a lot you can do to support your friend through their illness. Learning about your friend's cancer, keeping in regular contact during their treatment, and listening when they want to talk will help you understand what they are going through.

However, don't feel like you have to talk about their illness all the time. Your friend is still the same person they were before, and some days they may just want to be part of your normal activities and conversations.

Do you have more questions, or need some help?

CLIC Sargent has been working with young people for over 20 years, and we understand what you're going through. Our care professionals include social workers, youth support workers and nurses, who provide clinical, practical and emotional support. Talk to your CLIC Sargent care professional, or call us on **0300 330 0803*** and we'll put you in touch with someone who can help.

You can also visit our website at www.clicsargent.org.uk or email us on info@clicsargent.org.uk.

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