Telling the children about your illness

Making a start
What, when and how you tell your children about your illness will depend on many things, including:
- the age of the children
- the nature of the prognosis – if you are likely, or not likely, to recover
- your children’s previous experience of loss.

What and when to tell
It can be helpful to think of the process as a little bit like putting together a jigsaw. Younger children may not need to have all the pieces from the beginning. Even older children may not be able to handle too much information at one time.

It will help if you can choose a time when there will be enough time to talk, to answer questions and provide reassurance. However, children’s questions come at unpredictable times and you may have to balance the need to get to school on time with the opportunity for a family conversation.

There are three things to tell your children:
- Mum or Dad is seriously ill
- The name of the illness
- Your best understanding of what may happen.

This usually leads to important questions such as:
- Did I do anything to cause it?
- Can I catch it?
- Who will do the things that dad/mum does for me now they are sick?
- Will they die?

If you can’t answer a question exactly, it’s fine to say “I don’t know”. In fact, this answer is much better than a guess or making something up. If you are unsure about an answer you might say: ‘That’s a difficult question – to be honest, I’m not sure I know the answer. I need to find out more from mum’s doctor before I can answer that. And then it’s important to make sure you do this and come back to them with an answer when you have one.'
You may worry that telling children about the illness is likely to lead to difficult questions. But encouraging questions – and taking them seriously – will reassure them and help them to feel included.

Choosing the right words
It’s hard to work out the best words on the spot, so you might prefer to rehearse what you want to say first and prepare some possible answers to their questions. Try and use words the children will understand.

One explanation to a younger child might sound like this: ‘Remember I told you dad was not well and the doctor wanted to try to find out what was wrong?’ To do this dad went to the hospital and they took a small piece out of the lump in his tummy and looked at it very carefully with a microscope. Well, today dad and I went back to the hospital and they told us dad is ill because he has an illness inside his tummy called cancer. It’s generally a good idea to tell children the name of the illness – they are going to hear (or overhear) the word a lot and it is better for them to know what it is called rather than confusing euphemisms.

It’s also worth explaining that illness can make everyone a bit more emotional than usual. Warn them that mum or dad may seem distant or upset – or even grumpy – sometimes. And warn children that they may feel a bit left out for a while because the person who is sick needs lots of time and attention.

When an operation or further treatment is necessary
If the person is likely to get better, you can give a fairly positive answer: Because of mum’s illness the doctors are going to do an operation to try and fix what is wrong with her. They think that this operation will make her better. The doctors think it will help dad to have some strong medicine called chemotherapy to fight the cancer. Although this medicine will help him, it will also make him feel sick and tired for a while before he starts to feel better again. Reassure the children that you’ll tell them exactly what is happening, and that you’ll try to keep life as normal as possible. This is also the time to prepare them for possible physical changes, such as hair loss.

If treatment has not been successful
Depending on the ages of your children, this will be the time to give them more ‘pieces of the jigsaw’. Older children may ask for more information and will already be thinking about what this might mean for everyone in the family.