

## Talking with Your Children about Breast Cancer Surgery: Resources and Tips

Talking with your child about your breast cancer surgery is a big task. As difficult as it may seem, it is important for your child to understand what is going on and what to expect. This document provides resources and tips to help you talk with your children about your breast cancer surgery.

### Preparing for the Talk

- Develop a good understanding of your new diagnosis and treatment plan. Your child may ask questions and you want to be prepared to answer them. Several Baptist MD Anderson Cancer Center resources are available to help you better understand your diagnosis and treatment.
  - Breast Cancer: Diagnosis, Treatment and Follow-up
  - Breast Surgery Pathway (BrS1, BrS10)
  - What to Expect After Your Breast Surgery: Answers to Some Common Questions
- Think about how you will communicate the basics to your child. There are many helpful resources about communicating with children. Review these resources to prepare.
  - When You Don't Know What to Say...A Guide for Parents. This Guide provides age-specific tips on talking with children.
  - Pathfinder: Communicating with Children
- Make sure you are ready, emotionally, before you begin the conversation. If you have not dealt with your own feelings about your diagnosis and surgery, you may communicate your own fear and distress to your child. The Baptist MD Anderson Cancer Center social work counselor is available to talk with you about any fears or distress you may have. You may ask your nurse to make an appointment for you.

### Talking with Your Child

- Pick a good time and find a quiet place to talk with your child. Remember, your goal is to communicate the basics in a way your child can understand. Use simple, direct language to tell your child that you are ill and that you will be having surgery. Throughout the conversation, reassure your child that you are at a good hospital with good doctors and you are getting the best care possible.
- Make sure your child knows you have cancer and understands what cancer is and is not. Remember the three “C’s” of talking to your child about your cancer diagnosis:
  - The illness is called **cancer**
  - It is not **catchy**
  - It is not **caused** by anything we did or did not do.
- Be specific about surgery. Explain that it is a way to treat cancer. During surgery, the doctor will give you medicine to go to sleep so you do not feel any pain. Then the doctor will remove the part of the breast that has cancer. The doctor does this by opening up the

skin, removing the part of the breast with cancer and then sewing you back up. Drawing a basic picture or using an illustration may help show your child where your tumor is located. You may want to explain that the doctor will have to remove all or part of your breast to remove the cancer.

- Be specific about the healing process. Explain what you will look like when you come home. You may have a tube, called a drain, coming from the surgery site. This tube would let fluid and blood from your surgery drain out of your body. Let your child know that they may need to be careful giving you a hug so they do not pull on the tubes.
- Let your child know you may need his or her help after surgery. Explain that while you are healing, you will not be able to lift anything heavy. You may be tired and have some pain. It may be a while before you are back to “normal” in the child’s eyes. Let your child know what he or she can do to help, and be specific.
  - He or she can carry dishes from the table to the sink,
  - Bring you a glass of water or blanket
  - Load clothes into the washer and dryer.
- Assure your child that you have made plans for help while you are getting better. You will be well cared for and your child will be able to continue with their own activities without too much interruption. If there will be changes to your child’s activities, let them know. Do not be upset if they express anger at changes in their life. That is a normal response.
- Ask your child if he or she has any questions and be prepared to answer them. Let your child know you are available and willing to talk about your treatment again. Assure your child that you will let him or her know of any changes. Tell them that it is okay to feel worried or scared, and it is okay to cry. Talking about their feelings can help them feel better.