

Information resources for families

What is childhood cancer?

What is cancer?

Cells are the basic building blocks that make up all the organs and tissues in our body. Cancer is a disease where cells in the body grow in an uncontrolled way. Cancer cells divide and grow when they shouldn't and stay alive longer than they should. Cancer cells can take the place of normal cells. A mass of cancer cells is called a tumour. Each type of cancer has its own name, treatment and rate of cure.



How is childhood cancer different to adult cancer?

Things that cause adult cancer such as smoking and chemicals aren't obvious causes of cancer in children. Children's cancers affect different parts of the body to adult cancers and occur much less often. The most common types of cancer in adults are skin, breast, prostate, lung and bowel. In children, cancers of the blood and bone marrow, lymph tissue, brain, nervous system, muscles, kidneys, and bone are most common. Cancer in children tends to respond better to treatment than cancer in adults and overall, cure rates in children are much higher than in adults.

Causes of childhood cancer

Many parents wonder what caused their child's cancer. They fear that something they did or did not do caused the disease. As far as we know, nothing a parent or child did could have caused or prevented the cancer. You cannot catch cancer from another person. We do not know the exact cause of most childhood cancers but scientists are working to try to find the causes. A very small amount of childhood cancers are hereditary (passed on from parent to child). If you have thoughts or concerns about what may have caused your child's cancer, you should talk to your doctor or nurse.

As far as we knew, nothing a patient or child did caused or prevented the cancer.