

Hôpital de Montréal
pour enfants
Centre universitaire
de santé McGill



Montreal Children's
Hospital
McGill University
Health Centre

“Getting back on my feet and moving on”:

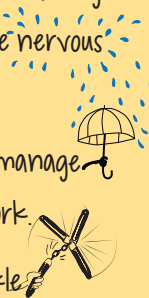
How to deal with the back-to-school experience

Name: _____

If you have been out of school during
your treatment, you may be nervous
to go back.

This booklet covers how to manage
school, friends, and homework.

It offers tips on how to tackle
going back to “normal” life, as
well as information about the
back-to-school process.





Acknowledgements

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Patient Education Office



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Part I. Getting back on my feet and moving on*

We know that going back to school after cancer treatment is a big step. Based on our experience and what teenagers and their families have told us, we have designed this booklet so that getting back to school can be easier for you.

We'll give you some tips to help you manage school, friends and homework. Going back to "normal life" might feel challenging. The good news is that you are not alone. Your parents, your health care team, and your teachers are there to make sure the transition goes smoothly.

Don't be afraid to speak up and ask them for help if you have any questions or concerns. We will be there to guide you each step of the way.



Your Cancer health care team
McGill University Health Centre

Part 2. Seven Tips for going back to school

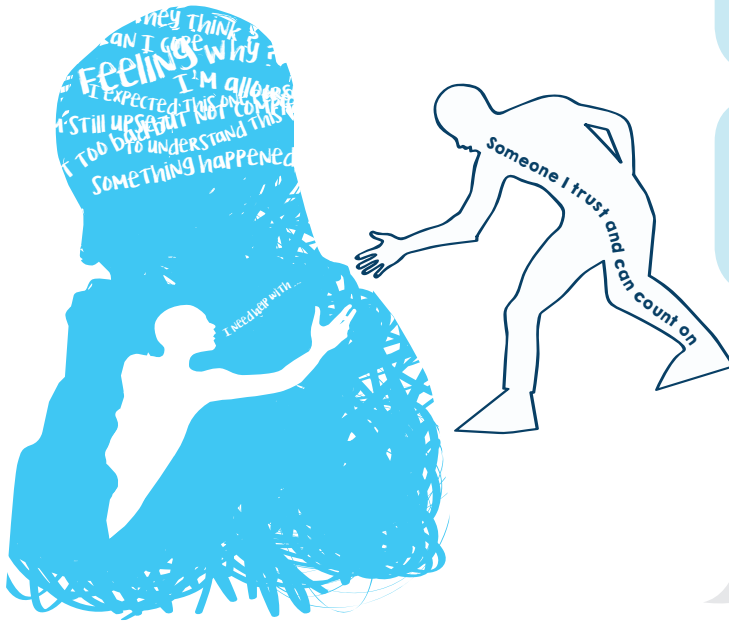
Going back to school might feel overwhelming at first. You may have a lot of questions.

You might wonder: Are you ready? How will people react? Will your friends treat you differently? How will it go?

This section offers tips for dealing with your return back to school. Use all the strengths you gained from your cancer experience to tackle the back-to-school change. You can do it!



I. Ask for help



"I felt so alone.
It helped to speak
to my teachers."

"They were very
understanding
and a big help!"









I had no idea!
You can talk
to me too if
you're feeling
down.

Remember, you don't have to go through this alone.
You do have people who are there to listen and help
if you need. Not sure who? You can lean on:

- Your **"Healthcare Team"**, that is, a doctor, nurse, social worker, psychologist, child life specialist, music therapist, teachers or spiritual care person. We are here for you!
- **Support groups** such as Cancer support groups: (for example, Leucan can offer a Back-to-School teaching session for your class about cancer and how you are overcoming it)
- Your **"Go-to person"**, that is, someone you trust. You should be able to count on them to talk about your feelings and the challenges you might face when going back to school. This person can also help you talk to others about what to expect

- **Your parent** might be the person that you want at the beginning. That's normal. They are there to help guide you. But sometimes, it's okay to speak with someone else
- A **friend** is anyone you can trust and you feel would support you during this transition
- A **person on your Health Care Team** can help with your back to school planning and questions
- A **teacher, counsellor or coach** might help you adjust with school since they know the staff and students there and the details of the work you have to do

Make a list of people that you might consider to be your “Go-to person” below:

 Tel-Jeunes 1-800-263-2266	Phone us 24/7 ●	
		
		
		



Interested in a teaching session for your class?
 Speak to your “Go-to Person” to help organize one.

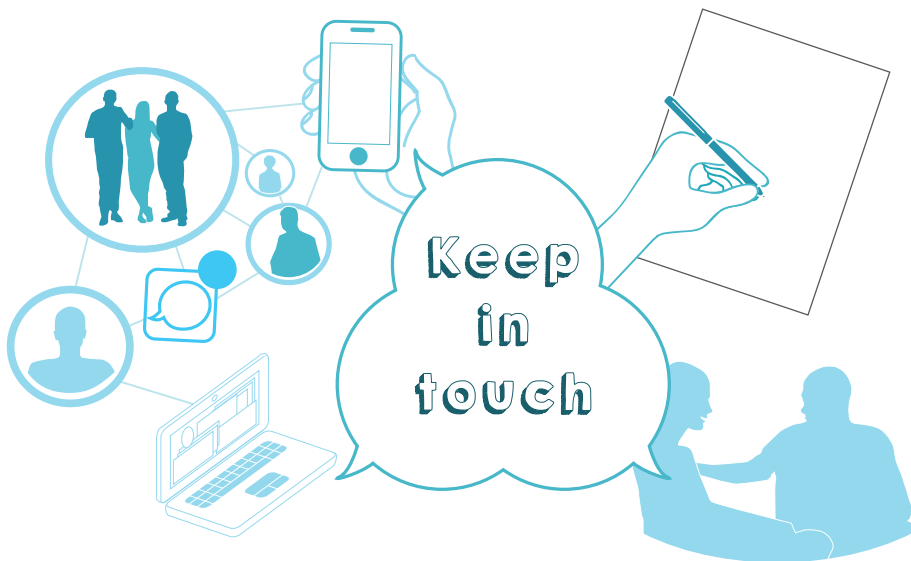
2. Stay connected with friends (before and when you go back)

“They were there for me...
they would call me and
look for me too.”

“I have this really close friend.
He always checks up on me...”

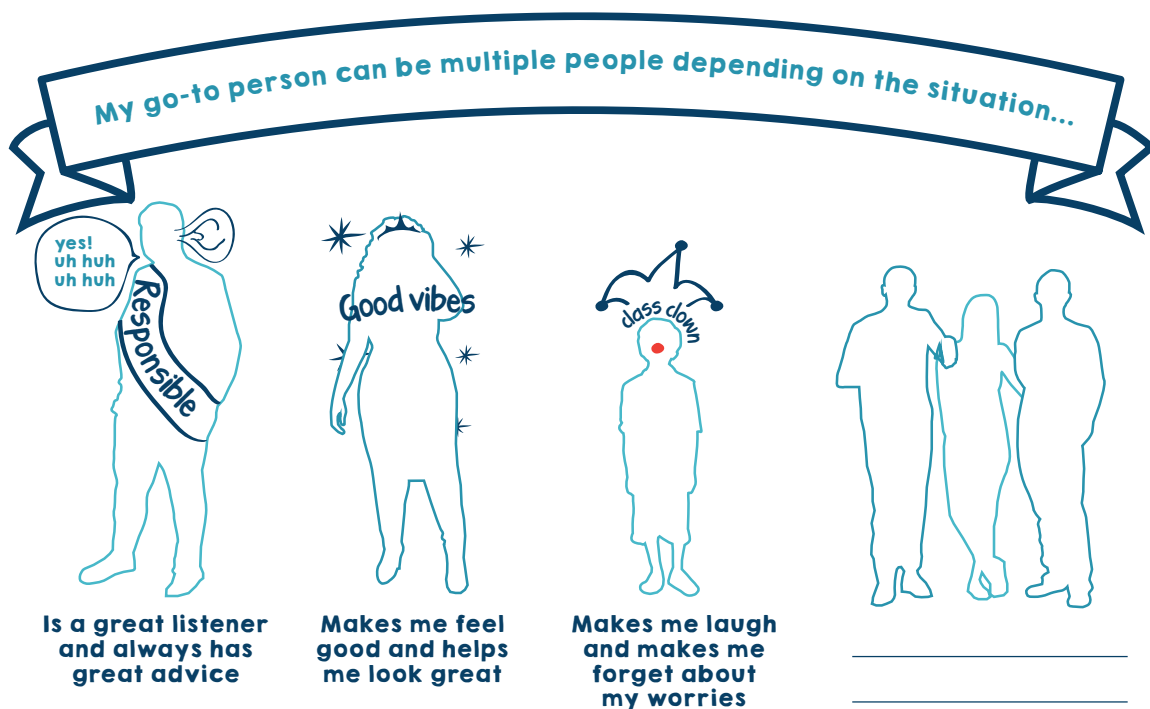
Going back to school might make you feel scared, nervous or shy at first. Having a friend by your side can help. Start small. Reach out to one friend you trust. When you are ready, try connecting with another. It’s also normal that your circle of friends might change.

Staying in touch with your friends while you are at the hospital receiving treatment can help you readjust at school. One way you can stay connected with your friends is with social media.



When you are ready to go back to school, try hanging out with your friends before you go back to class. This will help make the transition back to school easier, since you will have already seen your friends.

Sometimes, you might go back to school in a different grade or class with a new group of classmates. This is a great opportunity to reach out and make new friends. Talk to your “Go-to Person” about ways to do so.



Did you know ?

You might get a lot of attention at first when you go back to school. This might feel strange, especially if you are not used to being in the spotlight. Speak to your “Go-to person” if this happens to you.



3. Talk about it



"I'm sure they know (about my cancer), but just did not know how to handle it"

Your friends have not had the same experience as you and they might have a tough time understanding and dealing with your illness. They might not know what to say or what to do. Talking about your cancer experience may be hard at first but can make it easier for you and others. You can also ask your parents to talk to your teachers if you'd rather not.

Sharing this booklet with your friends might help them understand what you are going through, and what they can expect. See page 22 for some frequently asked questions and some common answers.

Remember

Who you speak to and how much you choose to share about your experience with others is completely up to you.





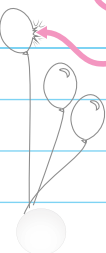
Activity

Food for Thought:

What are some things I'd like to share with my friends and classmates?



Hair strategies to deal with baldness:



4. Tell your friends and teachers what to expect

“You feel like you’re special, ... (different) not like everyone around you, ‘cause you need ... extra care or ... attention...”

People might want to help, but do not know how to. They might be afraid to offer help, because they don’t want you to think they pity you. Be honest with your friends and teachers about what you need and what you don’t need. Explain what they can do to help you – don’t be afraid to say exactly what you want.



In school, you might need :

- Snacks and water
- More bathroom breaks
- To wear a mask to protect you from germs
- To sit at the front of the class to see or hear better
- To miss class because of treatments
- Help carrying your schoolbag (or a bag with wheels)



If you know you're going to miss classes because of appointments, you could:

- Ask a friend to take notes for you;
- Get the teacher to email you with any work you miss.

Going back to school after chemotherapy might affect your energy levels while in class. Start school gradually. It's also a good idea to tell your teachers what's going on. Let them know what to expect.

Take your time getting used to school again :

- Step out of class to take a break
- Take a break if you feel tired in gym or recess
- Ask for help with schoolwork
- Take your time!



5. If you feel different, that's ok

You have to create a “new normal” for your relationships at school, how you learn, how your body has changed, and how you feel today.

Remember, you have been through a lot. While some things have changed, you are still the same person.



Here are some examples of things that might be different from your peers.

- Having a port-o-cath
- Hair thinning and hair loss
- Scars
- Changes to hearing
- Changes to eyesight
- Changes in how I walk or keep my balance
- Weight change
- Changes in my skin color
- Other...

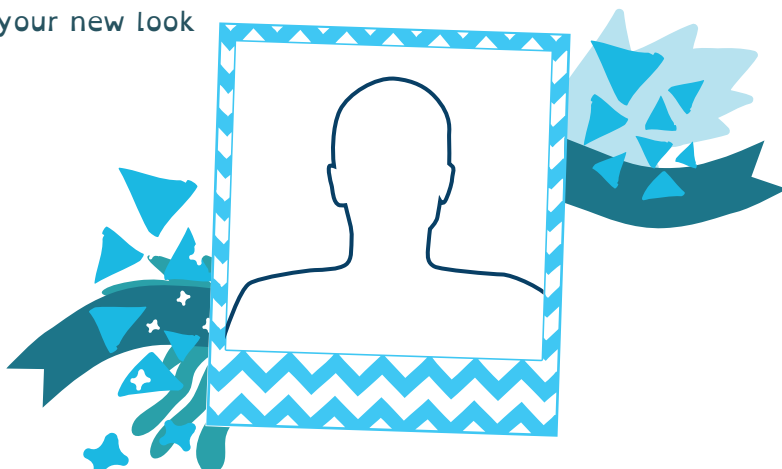
What to do if you are losing your hair or have lost some hair

Losing your hair is one of the more noticeable effects of chemo. Going back to school with less hair may take some getting used to.

You don't have to do anything to cover your baldness, but you may feel more comfortable wearing something on your head at first or in some situations.

What you decide to do is up to you. Here's what you can do:

1. Cut your hair short or shave your head
2. Wear a scarf, bandana, hat or cap, (especially if it's sunny or cold outside)
3. Wear a wig
4. Post a picture of your new look



Activity

Tick off any changes that you might be experiencing.

Changes in your body:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nausea | <input type="checkbox"/> Less strength |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling tired | <input type="checkbox"/> Pain or discomfort |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling out of breath | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: |

Changes in your thoughts or feelings:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty remembering things | <input type="checkbox"/> Shorter attention span. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stronger emotions | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: |

List some of the things that have not changed since you started chemotherapy:



Remember : It's ok to feel different, but remember you are still the same you!

6. Respect your limits. Know what you can and cannot do

“... I did not realize that I was getting tired and at the end of the day, I was exhausted. ... The next day I was not able to do anything. So, [my advice] is to go slow.”

Be patient with yourself as your body and mind slowly adjust to being back at school. You are not being “lazy”. Your body is getting used to a “new normal” and your medications may make you feel very tired. It will take time.



When you first go back, you might find that a full day is hard to do. This might mean that you won't be able to play sports or do other physical activities right away. Instead, you might want to explore a new hobby until you feel better.

Brainstorming

What are some new hobbies or activities you may want to try? You can use this space to plan your ideas.



Your learning and homework habits might change when you go back to school. Your “Go-to Person” could be a good person to talk to if this period is difficult.

If this is the case for you, you can:

- Ask for a tutor. (This is helpful if you have missed lots of work and have a lot to learn)
- Ask for a **gradual and flexible** schedule, especially if a full day of school is too much or too tiring
- Talk to your teacher to identify what homework is the most important and what subjects, to focus on



Remember, you are getting extra support because you have just come back to school after cancer treatment. This is not special treatment.

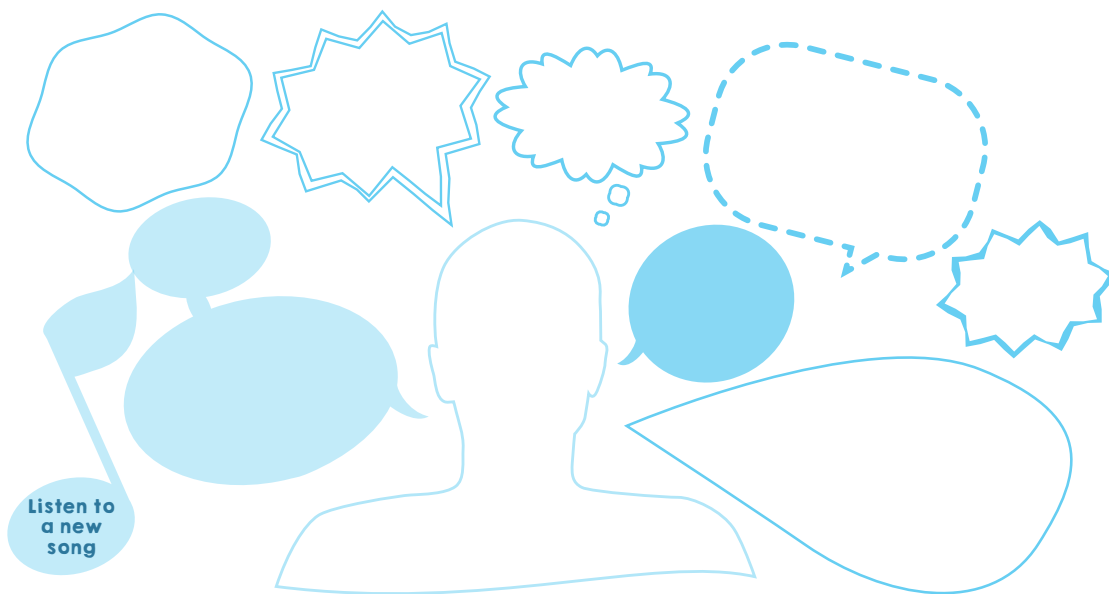
7. Give yourself time

You might feel ready to jump right back into the swing of things. Don't be surprised if it's not easy. You might have to work harder than you did before. Some of your interests might also change. All of this is normal and okay.

For some, life can become more meaningful. Your goals might become clearer. You might feel new energy at school that will drive you to do new things with your life.

Whether you find it easy to get back into the swing of things, or if it is a bit more challenging, remember that you might go through an adjustment period.

Setting small, easy goals for yourself can help you adapt to your new reality.



7. Give yourself time

Don't be hard on yourself and remember to celebrate your accomplishments. You have been through a lot. Don't forget to take time for yourself outside of school and schoolwork. It is important to relax and take it easy too.

Activity

What are some things you like to do to have fun?

What do you do to help you relax or to make you happy?



the Mindfulness Mandala

What is a mindfulness mandala and how can it help you ?

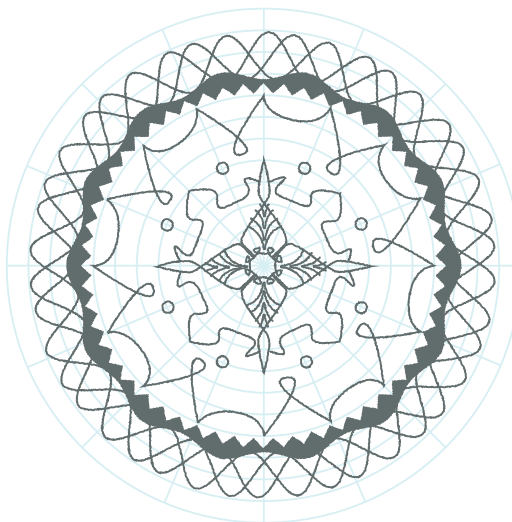
Mindfulness helps make you aware of things that may be affecting you without letting negative thoughts take over. You can use this Mandala in two ways:

You can draw a version of your life or how you want it to be, using a special color to represent something you are feeling. This can help you understand what affects you and give you time to make decisions that are thoughtful and positive.

Or you can use this space to draw whatever comes to mind. You don't need a plan.

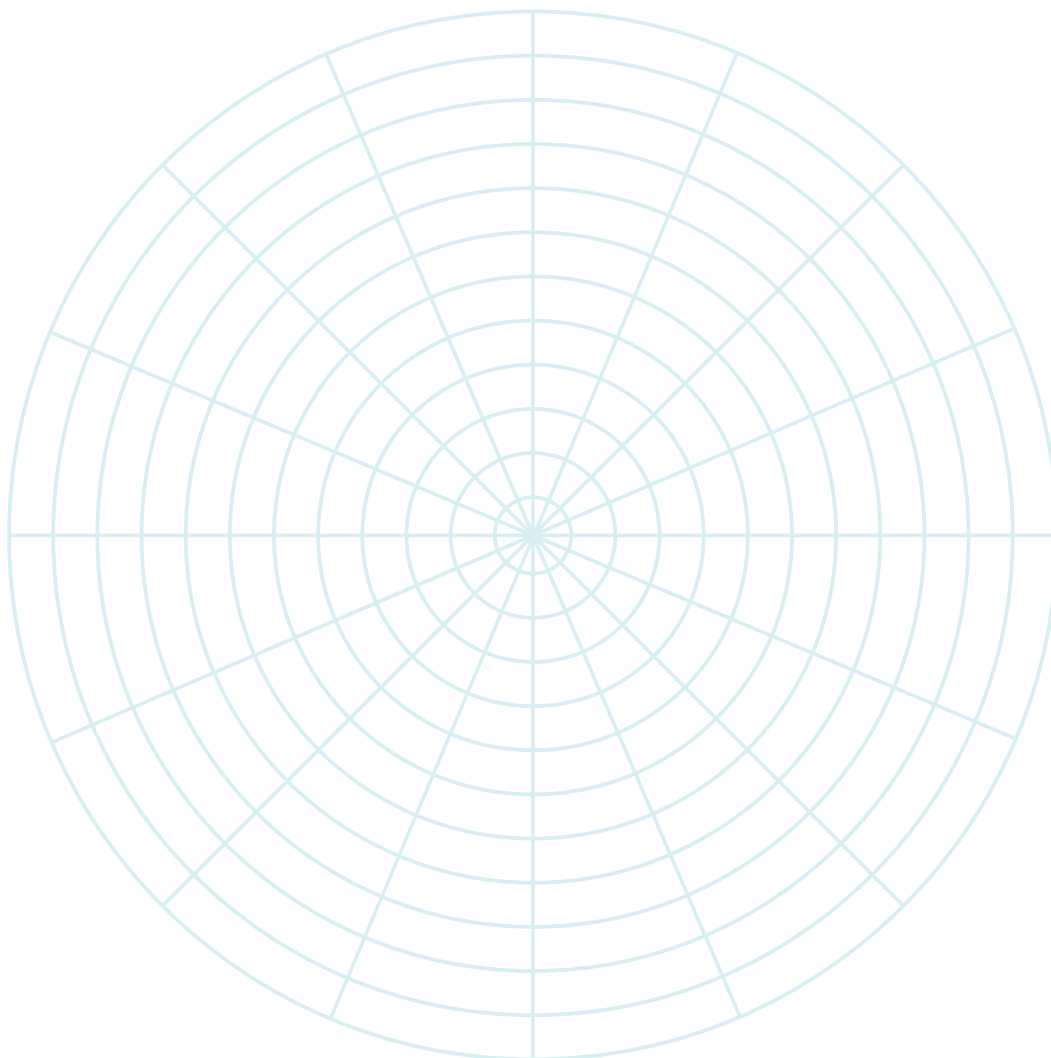
The important thing is to keep focused on things that matter to you most to help you understand who you are and what you want to be.

Example of a mandala:



Color : feeling

<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>



Part 3. How to answer difficult questions

Your friends and other people have not had the same experience as you. They might have a tough time understanding and dealing with your illness. They might not know what to say. Some people avoid you at first. Others might speak without really thinking. They might say things that are unkind, annoying or too personal. Talking about your cancer experience can make it easier for you and others even though it can be hard to talk about it at first, especially with people you don't know well.

If people make offensive comments, try not to react. They're probably just nervous or confused about how to act. But if it continues, let someone know.

Remember that who you speak to and how much you choose to share about your experience is completely up to you.

Here are some examples of questions you might be asked, and how you can choose to answer:

Why do you look different?

Chemotherapy treatment uses strong medicines to attack the cancer cells in my body. But chemo also attacks healthy cells too, like hair cells. That's why I've lost my hair.

Weight: The medicine that I take has side effects – so I might lose weight or gain weight.

Skin: Some chemo treatment can make my skin more sensitive to the sun or change the colour of my skin or my nails.

These are all normal reactions to the medications I am taking.

Why do you get emotional so easily?

I have had a lot on my mind lately and my treatments can make me tired and sometimes a bit moody.

How come you are having a hard time with schoolwork?

The medicine I take for my cancer treatment affects my concentration and I can have problems remembering things.

Why do you get “special privileges” in class?

Say that you have just come back from having cancer treatments.

They’re not really “special privileges”. It is really hard for me to do some of the things I had been able to do before, so I sometimes need a bit of help.

For example, I need to sit closer to the front of class or take more time to do my homework because it takes me longer to concentrate and I get tired easily.

Does the chemo hurt?

It depends, the treatment mostly makes me feel tired, but sometimes my body reacts to the treatment and it can hurt.

Will your hair grow back?

Eventually it's supposed to but it might look different than before.

I'm thinking of wearing a hat or scarf or something until then.

My parents already spoke with the school. So, I have permission to wear a hat at school if I want.

Remember, if you don't feel like talking or don't know what to say, it's ok to say something like: "I don't really want to talk about this right now." If someone is bothering you about how you look, speak up. Tell a friend, your parents, a teacher at school or your go-to person.

Is there something I can do to help?

Be honest, the answer depends on how you are feeling and if you want to accept help.

Yes. Can you help me by ...?

Maybe. Do you think you can help me ...?

Examples: carry my books or schoolbag to the next class, go over my class notes, do something fun. If you really don't want help, that's ok too. You can say:

No thank you.

Is there stuff you can't do?

I can do most things, but for now, I'm just trying to take things easy. I might just need more time or try not to do stuff that will make me too tired.

What to say when you don't really want to talk or don't have an answer.

Thanks for asking, but it's kind of hard to talk about that now.

Remember, if you don't know the answer to something, it is okay to say:

I don't know.



Don't be afraid to talk to your friends, parents, or designated "Go-to Person" about how you feel; they are there to help.

Part 4. Looking for more information ?

Leucan School Awareness Program

leucan.qc.ca/en/services/school-awareness-program/

Montreal Children's Hospital Family Resource Center

mchfamilylibrary.ca

Childhood Cancer Canada - Back to School

[childhoodcancer.ca/education/educators_guide/
helping-students-their-families](http://childhoodcancer.ca/education/educators_guide/helping-students-their-families)

*Hmm, I might save these in
a folder for the future..*

Need to speak to someone?

Here's who you can call:

- **Personnel at your School**
- **Your Healthcare Team**
- **Your "Go-to person"**
- **Tel-Jeunes**

Tel: 1-800-263-2266

www.teljeunes.com



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NOTES:
