



COVID-19: A support guide for families of children with heart disease

Many people in our community are feeling worried about COVID-19. Children and families affected by heart disease may be feeling especially worried. There is support available for you and your family at Cincinnati Children's Hospital. There are also simple things you can do to look after your emotional health. Here are some resources to help.

What can I do to feel less worried?

Get accurate information and advice

There is a lot of confusing and misleading information available, so it's important to stick to credible sources. The Cincinnati Children's website has information on COVID-19 for children with heart disease:

<https://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/patients/coronavirus-information>

<https://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/patients/coronavirus-information/condition-specific/heart>

Other credible information sources include:

Centers for Disease Control: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

Ohio Department of Health: <https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/covid-19/>

Cincinnati Health Department: <https://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/health/covid-19/>

Take breaks from media coverage

Constant exposure to negative information can cause anxiety. While it is good to stay informed, try to find a balance. Take breaks from media coverage and give your mind a rest.

Keep a balanced perspective

When we are worried or stressed our minds often get stuck on the worst-case scenario. While it's normal to feel worried, try to keep things in perspective.

Remind yourself:

COVID-19 illness is usually mild and most people recover without specialized treatment.

Children appear to be less affected by COVID-19 than adults.

Ask yourself:

Am I underestimating my ability to cope? Sometimes thinking about how you would cope, even if the worst were to happen, can help you put things into perspective. Think about how you have coped with challenges in the past and the strengths you can draw on.

Stay connected

Feeling connected to others is an important part of being human. Social distancing and periods of self-isolation to manage the spread of COVID-19 are likely to disrupt our connections with others. Try to stay in touch with friends and family. Listening to music or a podcast might also help you feel connected with the community around you.

Stick to normal routines as much as possible

Most families are experiencing changes in their daily life as a result of COVID-19. Some parents may need to work from home, social or sporting events may be cancelled, and children may be staying home from school. Having routines during times of stress can help your family (especially children) feel safe and secure. This might include keeping regular sleep routines, meal times, and family rules. Scheduling time for play and fun activities is also important. Developing a family schedule can be a helpful way of creating a sense of routine and predictability. Here is an example to help get you going:

Keep up healthy habits

Keeping healthy habits, such as getting enough sleep, eating well and exercising are always important for our emotional health, but even more so during stressful times. Exercise reduces stress and tension. It also gives you energy and improves your mood.

Take time out for you

This is easier said than done, especially for parents! Taking time to recharge can lift your mood and energy levels, and often helps you to be more available to your loved ones. Think about what you find fun and rewarding. This might include reading a book or magazine, calling a friend, soaking in the bathtub, watching a comedy, playing an instrument, or listening to music.

Daily routine

Rise & shine
Breakfast, make your bed, brush teeth, get dressed
Outdoor time
family walk, outdoor play
Learning time
no electronics, reading, homework, journal
Creative time
drawing, Legos, crafts, cooking
Lunch
Home chores
Quiet time
reading, yoga, nap
Learning time
electronics OK, virtual zoo or museum tour, educational games
Outdoor time
family walk, outdoor play
Dinner time
Bath time
Reading or TV time
Bedtime

Talking with my child about COVID-19

Children absorb information from the world around them, including the news, social media, and conversations between the adults in their life. Children are sensitive to the emotions of those around them and pick up on feelings of stress and anxiety. Talking with your child about COVID-19 can help them to understand and cope with what is happening. Here are some suggestions:

Make time to talk

Try to find a time to talk when you won't be rushed or distracted and can give your child your full attention. Choosing a time when your child is likely to feel most comfortable talking is also a good idea. This might be when you're driving together in the car, out on a walk, or during a meal.

Find out what your child already knows

It's important not to overwhelm children with information. A good place to start is to ask your child what he or she already knows. This will allow you to clarify any misunderstandings. Asking your child if they have any questions will help you get a sense of what they'd like to know and their biggest worries.

Keep it simple and honest

People often feel more worried if they don't understand what's happening. Give simple and honest information that your child can understand to help calm their fears. Some tips:

- Use a calm and reassuring voice.
- Keep it brief, then pause - give your child time to ask questions.
- For younger children, simple information might include:

"Some people are getting sick with a germ. It makes them cough and have a fever. The doctors and hospitals are taking good care of them to help them feel better."

- Give your child a sense of control by explaining what they can do to stay well, such as washing their hands. You can make this fun by singing a song together while washing.
- Avoid scary or unnecessary information (such as death rates).

Tune in to your child's feelings

Some children may feel upset, worried or fearful about COVID-19 and others may not. When talking with your child about COVID-19, ask how he or she is feeling. Take time to listen to their response. Some ways you can help:

- Listen to any fears or concerns your child might have.
- Let your child know that you understand and that it's ok to feel the way they do.
- Reassure your child that they are safe and that you are there to help and support them.
- Explore things that help your child to feel better. This might be physical comfort (like a hug), having time to talk with someone they trust, or doing fun activities.



- Provide opportunities for your child to express their feelings through drawing and play.

Monitor media exposure

Exposure to media coverage can increase worries. Try to be present when your child is watching, reading or listening to the news, so you are there to talk things through with them.

Where can I find extra support?

It's natural to feel stressed and overwhelmed. Remember there is support for you and your family. The Heart Institute team are dedicated to supporting children with heart disease and their families. If you would like to talk to a member of our Heart Institute team, please call: **513-636-4432**.

Cincinnati Children's Hospital also has a team of psychologists dedicated to supporting children and families. If you would like to speak with one of our psychologists, please call: **513-636-4336**.

Activities for children during social distancing:

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/simple-activities-children-and-adolescents>

Resource for parents during COVID-19:

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/parent-caregiver-guide-to-helping-families-cope-with-the-coronavirus-disease-2019>

The Conversation: "How to talk to your kids about Coronavirus"

<https://theconversation.com/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-coronavirus-133576>

Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center:

<https://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/patients/coronavirus-information>

Cincinnati Children's Heart Institute: <https://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/patients/coronavirus-information/condition-specific/heart>

Cincinnati Public Library:

<https://www.cincinnatilibrary.org/eBranch/kids.html>