"Not being able to snuggle him completely breaks my heart."

— Erin Nahorny, mother of Sammy Nahorny, in therapy for neuroblastoma

Cancer patient Sammy Nahorny, 6, reaches out as his father, Chris, enters his room last week at Comer Children's Hospital in Chicago.

FIGHTING FOR HIS LIFE IN ISOLATION

Comer's 1st patient to undergo unique therapy, turning him radioactive, must battle cancer without parents' touch

By Bonnie Miller Rubin
Tribune reporter

At precisely the time 6-year-old Sammy most needed his parents, they were forced to keep their distance because his unique cancer treatment made him radioactive. Even his favorite blanket and stuffed animal were off-limits, lest they, too, become contaminated.

Last week, Sammy Nahorny became the first patient at Comer Children's Hospital to undergo high-dose radiation therapy for neuroblastoma, one of the deadliest pediatric cancers.

The treatment confined him to a room of less than 200 square feet, lined with 450,000 pounds of bricks that contain lead. Every inch — including the floor — was covered in paper or plastic, as well as any object Sammy touched, such as video games and the remote control. For five days, Sammy was mostly alone, waiting for his radioactivity levels to drop closer to normal.

"Not being able to snuggle him completely breaks my heart," said his mother, Erin Nahorny. "It's probably the worst feeling I have experienced. ... He gives me these puppy dog eyes and just wants me to hold him."

Erin and Chris Nahorny interacted with their son primarily through a closed-circuit TV monitoring system and walkie-talkies. They helped care for Sammy and made brief visits, but they could not linger or comfort him the way they wanted. Only one parent at a time was allowed in the room, for a total of about 40 minutes a day between the two of them.

When his mother or father entered his room, he or she...