

**MACMILLAN**  
CANCER SUPPORT

# BE THERE FOR SOMEONE FACING CANCER





**Little things that I naturally did anyway were more important when she was not as strong to deal with everyday life.**

**Leigh (right), whose sister was diagnosed with thyroid cancer**

# About this leaflet

This information is for you if you are supporting a friend, family member or partner who has cancer.

You probably want to help them, but you might not know what you can do. This leaflet talks about the different stages of having cancer to help you understand what your friend, family member or partner is going through.

We explain diagnosis, treatment and what happens after treatment. Each section has:

- practical tips on how you can support the other person
- suggestions for how to talk to them about what they are going through.

This is only a short guide and we do not go into detail about everything here. But we have more information about the things we mention in this leaflet. Visit our website [macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support) or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

This leaflet is not aimed at carers. A carer is someone who gives unpaid support to a person who could not manage without this help. If you are a carer, we have more information and support for you in our booklet **Looking after someone with cancer**. Call us on **0808 808 00 00** to find out more.

In this leaflet, we have included quotes from people who have supported someone with cancer. Some are from our Online Community (**macmillan.org.uk/community**). The others are from people who have chosen to share their story with us, including Leigh, who is on the cover of this leaflet with her sister Lindsey. To share your experience, visit **macmillan.org.uk/shareyourstory**

## Your data and the cancer registry

When you are diagnosed with cancer in the UK, some information about you, your cancer diagnosis and your treatment is collected in a cancer registry. This is used to plan and improve health and care services. Your hospital will usually give this information to the registry automatically. There are strict rules to make sure the information is kept safely and securely. It will only be used for your direct care or for health and social care planning and research.

Talk to your doctor or nurse if you have any questions. If you do not want your information included in the registry, you can contact the cancer registry in your country to opt out. You can find more information at **macmillan.org.uk/cancerregistry**

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**'I took her out for coffee and a catch-up. And I did a few chores around her house. Just little things to help when she wasn't feeling strong.'**

**Leigh**

# Supporting someone with cancer

If a friend, family member or partner is diagnosed with cancer, you will probably want to help. But you might not know what you can do. Or you may have trouble finding the right words when speaking to them. You might be so worried about what to say that you avoid talking. This can leave the other person feeling like they are facing the cancer alone.

## Your feelings

Although it is not you who has cancer, it can be a very difficult time for you too. You will need time to accept things, and you may have many different emotions to cope with. Talk to your family, friends or partner about how you feel. You may find they want to share their feelings with you too.

The Macmillan Support Line has specialists who can answer your questions or just be there to listen. Call us on **0808 808 00 00**. You could also get support from the Macmillan Online Community at **macmillan.org.uk/community**

You may want to find out about support or counselling for yourself. Your GP can give you more information.

# Diagnosis

When a friend, partner or family member is diagnosed with cancer, it can be frightening. You may worry about the treatment they will have, or how your lives may change. One of your biggest fears may be that they will die. However, many cancers can be cured if they are found early. And when a cancer is not curable, treatment often means it can be controlled for some time.

Knowing about the different stages of having cancer can help you understand what your friend, family member or partner is going through.

'During the early days while my sister was waiting for a diagnosis, I sent a card to her every day – a small gesture but it gave her a little smile.'

Gillian

## How cancer is diagnosed

Most people start by seeing their GP if they have symptoms. The GP may refer them to a hospital for tests. After the diagnosis, a cancer specialist usually does further tests to find out more about the cancer. This helps them decide on the best treatment.



## How you can help

### Be there

- Visit them, especially if you are worried they are feeling lonely. But let them know that it is ok for them to tell you if they want to be alone or do not want visitors.
- If you cannot visit, you could call or text them, or send an email or a card. Let them know they do not have to reply.
- Give them time to talk. It is sometimes important that you just listen.
- Spend time with them. You could go for a walk or watch TV or films together.
- Suggest they can call the Macmillan Support Line on **0808 808 00 00** to find out how we can help them.

'There were times when she would want to be completely on her own and times when she wanted company. We just made sure we were there for her when she needed it.'

**Cecilia**

### Be there for hospital appointments

- Help them plan for appointments. Ask if they have questions or things they want to say. Suggest they write notes to take with them on the day.
- Offer to go with them for support and to talk things through afterwards. You can wait for them in the waiting room if they want to go to the appointment alone.
- If you are with them during the appointment, offer to write things down to help them remember what is said.

'I went to appointments with her. Sometimes she was emotional, or unable to process what was being said. I wrote all the information down, so she could digest things later in her own time and have all the information she needed.'

**Cecilia**

## Be there between appointments

- Having information may help them feel more in control. You can tell them about our cancer information (see page 26).
- They might like to organise the information they have been given and keep a record of things like their symptoms. You could tell them about the free Macmillan Organiser (see page 26).
- Remember that they may not want to know all the details when they are diagnosed with cancer. Ask how much information they want.

'I bought her a laptop computer and set her up on the Macmillan Online Community. We both used the site daily to chat with other friends, patients and carers.'

**Gillian**

## Talking about it

You may worry about how your friend, partner or family member will react if you talk to them about their diagnosis. You may feel unsure about what to do if they cry or get angry. Or you might be worried that talking about the cancer will make them feel worse. But the opposite might be true. Not talking about a fear or worry can make it feel bigger.

It can be difficult to know what to say. But there is no right thing to say. The important thing is that you are there and that you listen. You do not need to have all the answers.

If your friend, partner or family member wants to talk, you can help by:

- listening
- letting them talk
- not changing the subject.

Talking can be a huge relief, so by just listening you will help them feel better.

However, they might find their feelings of shock and disbelief make it difficult to talk. They may want to be left alone for a while with their thoughts and feelings. This can be hard for you, but they will talk to you when they are ready.

## What to avoid saying

When someone is diagnosed with cancer, other people may tell them to think positively. But this is not always easy. There may be times when they feel sad or angry. These are common feelings. Although this may be difficult for you, do not feel you have to tell them to be positive.

You may have heard about other people's experiences with cancer. It may not be helpful to tell your family member, friend or partner about other people's stories. Cancer is different for every person. They will get the information they need from their healthcare team. Or they can contact the Macmillan Support Line on **0808 808 00 00**.



# Treatment

## How cancer is treated

The main cancer treatments are:

- surgery
- radiotherapy
- chemotherapy
- hormonal therapies
- targeted therapies
- immunotherapies.

Often a combination of more than one type of treatment is used.

We have more information about all of these treatments (see page 26).

## Possible side effects

Different treatments cause different side effects. These can include:

- a lowered immune system, which can make people more likely to get infections
- feeling very tired (fatigue)
- changes in appearance, such as hair loss, changes to body shape, and weight changes

- changes in how the body works or feels, such as feeling or being sick, diarrhoea or constipation
- eating problems, such as a loss of appetite, sore mouth, or problems chewing or swallowing
- emotional changes, such as anxiety, anger and depression.

Side effects can usually be reduced in some way. The healthcare team can give advice about how to cope with these.

## How you can help

### If they are in hospital

- Text or call to check if they want you to visit.
- Do not visit if you are not feeling well.
- Visit during visiting hours, and do not stay too long if they are tired.
- Take them a book, magazine, some music or something else you know they enjoy.
- Update them on what is happening with family members, friends or colleagues.
- Ask if anything needs doing at home that you can help with.

## **If they are at home**

- If they have a carer, offer to visit so the carer can have a break.
- Ask how often they would like you to visit – they will need time to rest.
- Do not visit if you are not feeling well.
- Ask if there is anything you can do to help. For example, ask if you could do some laundry, pick the children up from school, take care of a pet or weed the garden.
- If they feel up to it, suggest doing some gentle exercise together, like going for a short walk.
- If they have to go to hospital for treatment, offer to go with them and wait while they have it.
- If they are a work friend, send a card from yourself and the other people you work with.





**'We had the children quite a lot so she had some time on her own.'**

**Leigh**

## Talking about it

Some people find that changes in how their body looks or works are very hard to deal with. Your friend, partner or family member may feel less confident, and worry that people will treat them differently. They might want to talk to you about how they feel. Talking can help them adjust to any changes.

We all show our feelings in different ways, and sometimes one emotion is hiding another. For example, the person with cancer might feel frightened but show it by being angry. Try to remember that they may be angry about what is going on and not with you. Talking about our feelings can help us understand our behaviour. But this is not always easy.

If you find it hard to talk, it is ok to say 'I don't know what to say'. You may worry about saying this. But being honest about your feelings will help build trust between you. It will also make it easier for them to be honest about their feelings.

You may find these conversations too difficult. It is ok to suggest that your friend, family member or partner asks their GP or healthcare team for emotional support.

# After treatment

## What happens now?

If the aim of the treatment was to cure the cancer, your friend, family member or partner may not need any more treatment. Or they may be living with cancer and need more treatment in the future. They will probably have regular check-ups and scans.

They may start trying to get their life back to the way it was before the cancer. It can take time to recover from the effects of treatment, and it is normal to feel tired for several months. Some side effects might be long-lasting, and some people may have physical and emotional changes to get used to.

## How you can help

- They might want to focus more on their friends, family or social life. Suggest visiting or meeting up.
- It will take time for them to recover, so keep offering support. Ask them how they are and what you can do to help.
- Offer to help with things like gardening, shopping, cooking or housework.
- Being active might help them feel better. Offer to do some gentle exercise with them, like going for a walk.
- If they are nervous about check-ups or appointments, offer to go with them for support.
- If you cannot visit, call or text them, or send an email or a card.

## Talking about it

People have many different emotions after cancer and its treatment. They may be scared that the cancer will come back and they will need to have more treatment. They may wonder whether the cancer has been cured. Some people may feel low or depressed for a while. Other people feel anxious because they do not see their healthcare team anymore.



## **What can help**

When your friend, family member or partner is ready, talking can help them cope with their emotions.

You could encourage them to talk about what they are thinking about. Simple things work very well.

Try nodding or saying things like:

- ‘Yes’
- ‘I see’
- ‘What happened next?’.

During stressful times, it is the simple things that help. Sometimes just sitting with the person is enough.

Showing empathy is also helpful. If they start to cry as they talk, you could say something like:

- ‘I can see how upsetting that is for you’.
- If you are close to them, you could simply sit with them and hold their hand.

You could also repeat back what they have said.

This will help you check you have got it right. It will also show you are listening and trying to understand.

You could say things like:

- ‘So you mean that ...’
- ‘If I’ve understood you, you feel ...’.

You may find your own way of saying this, especially if you know each other very well.

Sometimes they may not want to talk about how they are feeling. If you tell them you are there for them, they will talk to you when they are ready.

## What to avoid saying

Do not feel you have to offer advice. It is fine to just listen. Even if it goes quiet for a time, try not to be afraid of the silence or feel you have to fill it.

Try not to say things like 'Things could be worse' or 'Things will work out'. This can sound like you are ignoring their worries or feelings. Let them say how they feel. Try to avoid humour or jokes if they are talking about feeling sad or worried. Sometimes it can help, but it may make things difficult.



# If the cancer cannot be cured

If the cancer comes back or has spread, there may come a time when treatment cannot control it. Your partner, family member or friend may be told that they only have a while to live.

They may become ill over many months. Or they may become ill more quickly. It is not possible to know when someone may die.

## Your feelings

Finding out that someone's cancer cannot be cured can be very difficult to cope with. You will have lots of different emotions. You might find it hard to believe that the cancer cannot be cured. After a few days, the shock and disbelief may be replaced by other feelings. These may make it difficult for you to think clearly.

You might need some time with a partner, family member or close friend to cope with the news. It may also help to talk to a counsellor. Macmillan's cancer support specialists can also provide advice and support. You can call them on **0808 808 00 00**. Or visit our Online Community at any time of the day or night at **[macmillan.org.uk/community](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/community)**



## How you can help

- Visit them at home, in hospital, or in the hospice or nursing home.
- If they do not want to be on their own, offer to work out a rota so that there is always someone with them.
- Ask if they would like to talk to a religious or spiritual advisor or a counsellor.
- They may only want to see their close family, so try not to feel hurt if this happens.
- Offer to help with housework, shopping and cooking so their carer (if they have one) can spend more time with them.
- Offer to sit with them to allow others to have a break.

## Talking about it

Most people find it difficult to talk about death and dying. People who are dying, and their family, friends and partner sometimes know what is happening. But they may not feel able to talk about it.

Often being with the person is enough. A loving look, a hug, or a squeeze of the hand can help if you cannot talk. Crying is a natural thing to do. You do not have to be brave. If you try to hide your feelings, you may not get the chance to say the things you want to.

Towards the end of their life, they will get weaker and less able to do things. A lot of the time they may just want to lie quietly with people sitting nearby. They can tell you if they would like to talk, be quiet or listen to music. This can be a very special time. You may find our booklet about the end of life helpful (see page 26).

There is no right way to cope with knowing that someone you are close to is dying. You can only cope in the way that is best for you and accept it in your own way. Our booklet **After someone dies: coping with bereavement** has more information and support (see page 26).



# About our information

We provide expert, up-to-date information about cancer. And all our information is free for everyone.

## Order what you need

You may want to order more leaflets or booklets like this one. Visit **be.macmillan.org.uk** or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

We have booklets on different cancer types, treatments and side effects. We also have information about work, financial issues, diet, life after cancer and information for carers, family and friends.

## Macmillan Organiser

This includes a records book to write down information such as appointments, medications and contact details. You can also download the app on IOS or Android.

## Online information

All of our information is also available at **macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support** There you'll also find videos featuring real-life stories from people affected by cancer, and information from health and social care professionals.

## Other formats

We also provide information in different languages and formats, including:

- audiobooks
- Braille
- British Sign Language
- easy read booklets
- eBooks
- large print
- translations.

Find out more at [macmillan.org.uk/otherformats](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/otherformats)

If you'd like us to produce information in a different format for you, email us at [cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk](mailto:cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk) or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.



# Other ways we can help you

At Macmillan, we know how a cancer diagnosis can affect everything, and we're here to support you.

## Talk to us

If you or someone you know is affected by cancer, talking about how you feel and sharing your concerns can really help

## Macmillan Support Line

Our free, confidential phone line is open 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Our cancer support specialists can:

- help with any medical questions you have about cancer or your treatment
- help you access benefits and give you financial guidance

- be there to listen if you need someone to talk to
- tell you about services that can help you in your area.

Call us on **0808 808 00 00** or email us via our website, **macmillan.org.uk/talktous**

## Information centres

Our information and support centres are based in hospitals, libraries and mobile centres. There, you can speak with someone face to face.

Visit one to get the information you need, or if you'd like a private chat, most centres have a room where you can speak with someone alone and in confidence.

Find your nearest centre at [macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres) or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

## Talk to others

No one knows more about the impact cancer can have on your life than those who have been through it themselves. That's why we help to bring people together in their communities and online.

## Support groups

Whether you are someone living with cancer or a carer, we can help you find support in your local area, so you can speak face to face with people who understand.

Find out about support groups in your area by calling us or by visiting [macmillan.org.uk/selfhelpandsupport](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/selfhelpandsupport)

## Online Community

Thousands of people use our Online Community to make friends, blog about their experiences and join groups to meet other people going through the same things. You can access it any time of day or night. Share your experiences, ask questions, or just read through people's posts at [macmillan.org.uk/community](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/community)

# Other useful organisations

There are lots of other organisations that can give you information or support.

**Cancer Research UK**  
**[www.cancerhelp.org.uk](http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk)**

Contains patient information on all types of cancer and has a clinical trials database.

**Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland**  
**[www.hscni.net](http://www.hscni.net)**

The official gateway to health and social care services in Northern Ireland.

**Healthtalk**  
**[www.healthtalk.org](http://www.healthtalk.org)**  
**[www.youthhealthtalk.org](http://www.youthhealthtalk.org)**

Watch video and audio clips of people talking about their experiences of cancer and its treatments.

**NHS Direct Wales**  
**[www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk)**

NHS health information site for Wales.



**NHS Inform**

**Helpline** 0800 22 44 88 (Mon to Fri, 8am to 10pm, Sat and Sun, 9am to 5pm)

**[www.nhsinform.scot](http://www.nhsinform.scot)**

NHS health information site for Scotland.

**NHS UK**

**[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)**

The UK's biggest health information website.

Has service information for England.

**Patient UK**

**[www.patient.info](http://www.patient.info)**

Provides people in the UK with information about health and disease. Includes evidence-based information leaflets on a wide variety of medical and health topics. Also reviews and links to many health-and illness-related websites.

## Disclaimer

We make every effort to ensure that the information we provide is accurate and up to date but it should not be relied upon as a substitute for specialist professional advice tailored to your situation. So far as is permitted by law, Macmillan does not accept liability in relation to the use of any information contained in this publication, or third-party information or websites included or referred to in it. Some photos are of models.

## Thanks

This booklet has been written, revised and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been approved by our Chief Medical Editor, Dr Tim Iveson, Macmillan Consultant Medical Oncologist.

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We welcome feedback on our information. If you have any, please contact [\*\*cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk\*\*](mailto:cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk)

## Sources

If you would like more information about the sources we use, please contact us at [\*\*cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk\*\*](mailto:cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk)

**This leaflet is about being there for someone facing cancer.**

**The leaflet talks about how you can support your friend, family member or partner. It also has suggestions for how you can talk to them about what they are going through.**

We're here to help everyone with cancer live life as fully as they can, providing physical, financial and emotional support. So whatever cancer throws your way, we're right there with you. For information, support or just someone to talk to, call **0808 808 00 00** or visit **macmillan.org.uk**

Would you prefer to speak to us in another language? Interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use. Are you deaf or hard of hearing? Call us using NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the NGT Lite app.

Need information in different languages or formats? We produce information in audio, eBooks, easy read, Braille, large print and translations. To order these, visit **macmillan.org.uk/otherformats** or call our support line.

**MACMILLAN  
CANCER SUPPORT**  
**RIGHT THERE WITH YOU**

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What's this logo? Visit **macmillan.org.uk/ourinformation**