

If you're diagnosed with cancer – a quick guide

This information is about what to expect when you find out you have cancer and where to get help and support. Underlined words are explained in the glossary at the end.

Being diagnosed with cancer can be a huge shock. You may be feeling lots of different emotions. But it doesn't mean you have to give up hope. Many people are now treated successfully or able to live with cancer for many years. There are lots of people and services that can support you.

If you have any questions or want someone to talk to, you can call Macmillan Cancer Support on **0808 808 00 00**, Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm. We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in another language. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use.

We have more information in other languages about different types of cancer, treatments and living with cancer. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations) or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

We have a longer booklet called **The cancer guide** that you might find helpful, but this is only available in English.

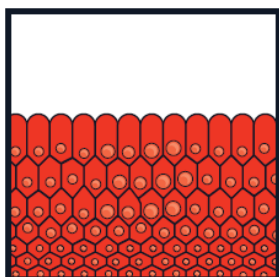
This information is about:

- What is cancer?
- How Macmillan can help
- What happens after diagnosis?
- Health and social care professionals you might meet
- The main cancer treatments
- How treatment is planned
- Talking to your healthcare team
- Coping with cancer – where to get support
- Glossary (explanation of words)
- More information in other languages

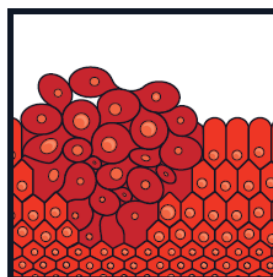
What is cancer?

Cancer starts in our body's cells. Cells are tiny building blocks that make up the organs and tissues of our body. Usually, these cells split (divide) to make new cells in a controlled way. This is how our bodies grow, heal and repair. Sometimes, this goes wrong and the cell becomes abnormal. The abnormal cell keeps dividing and making more and more abnormal cells. These cells form a lump called a tumour.

Normal cells



Cells forming a tumour



Not all lumps are cancer. A lump that is not cancer (benign) cannot spread to anywhere else in the body. A lump that is cancer (malignant) can grow into surrounding areas of the body.

Cancer cells sometimes break away from the first (primary) cancer and travel through the blood or lymphatic system to other parts of the body. Cancer cells that spread and develop into a tumour somewhere else in the body are called a secondary cancer.

How Macmillan can help

Macmillan is here to help you and your family. We will support you from the moment you're diagnosed, through your treatment and beyond. You can get support from:

- **The Macmillan Support Line (0808 808 00 00).** We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your language. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use. Our specialists can answer medical questions, give information about financial support or talk to you about your feelings. The phone line is open Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm.
- **The Macmillan website (macmillan.org.uk).** Our site has lots of English information about cancer and living with cancer. There is more information in other languages at macmillan.org.uk/translations
- **Macmillan nurses.** Our nurses are specialists in cancer and palliative care. They can give support to you and your family. To get a Macmillan nurse, you need to be referred. Ask your doctor or nurse about getting one, or call us on **0808 808 00 00**. If there isn't a Macmillan nurse in your area, you can still be referred to other specialist services.

- **Other Macmillan health and social care professionals.** We have lots of other professionals that help people with cancer, for example dietitians and physiotherapists.
- **Information centres.** At an information centre, you can talk to a cancer support specialist and get written information. Find your nearest centre at macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres or call us. Your hospital might have a centre.
- **Local support groups** – Find a group near you at macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups or call us.
- **Macmillan Online Community** – You can talk to other people in similar situations at macmillan.org.uk/community

What happens after diagnosis?

Your healthcare team should talk to you about your treatment options and about any support you might need. They will give you an idea of what your treatment will involve and when it can start. You may need to have some more tests or scans to find out more about the cancer.

Health and social care professionals you might meet

When you have cancer, you may meet lots of different health and social care professionals.

Key worker

You should have a key worker and be given their contact details. Your key worker is your main point of contact. They can answer your questions and tell you who can help with different things.

Hospital team (MDT)

At hospital, a multidisciplinary team (MDT) will manage your treatment and care. This is a group of health and social care professionals. The group might include some or all of these roles:

- **Clinical nurse specialist (CNS)** – a nurse who is an expert in a particular type of cancer. Your CNS might be your key worker (see above).
- **Haematologist** – a doctor who is an expert in diagnosing and treating blood disorders, including cancers that start in the blood.
- **Oncologist** – a doctor who is an expert in treating cancer.
- **Palliative care doctors and nurses** – experts in treating symptoms and making someone more comfortable when the cancer can't be cured.

- **Radiographer (therapeutic)** – an expert in giving radiotherapy.
- **Radiologist** – an expert in x-rays and scans.
- **Surgeon** – a doctor who is an expert in surgery and does operations.

There may be other people in the MDT depending on the type of cancer you have.

In your local area

There are other professionals who can help look after you while you're at home. They will be in contact with your hospital team. They include:

- **GP** – Your GP can help you manage symptoms and side effects and arrange for you to see any specialists if needed. They can arrange services to help you at home and talk to you about any treatment decisions you need to make.
- **Community and district nurses** – These nurses can visit you at home and give care and support to you and anyone looking after you. Your GP can contact them for you.
- **Practice nurse** – Some GP practices have nurses who work alongside the GP. A practice nurse might do things like take blood tests or put dressings on wounds.

Social services and voluntary organisations

If you need help at home, for example with washing, dressing, cleaning or shopping, speak to your GP or key worker. They may refer you to a social worker. A social worker can help with problems in the home to help someone live independently. There may also be other organisations in your area that could help.

The main cancer treatments

The aim of treatment is to cure the cancer, or to control it and relieve any symptoms.

The type of treatment you have will depend on the type of cancer and your situation. You may have more than one treatment. Cancer treatments can include:

- **surgery** – the cancer is removed in an operation
- **chemotherapy** – drugs are given to destroy cancer cells
- **radiotherapy** – high-energy x-rays are used to destroy cancer cells
- **hormonal therapy** – treatment changes the hormones in your body, which can slow down the cancer or stop it from growing
- **targeted therapy** (sometimes called biological therapy) – drugs are given that target the way cancer cells grow.

Clinical trials

You may be asked to take part in a clinical trial. Clinical trials test new treatments to see if they are more effective than current treatments. A trial might involve testing a new drug or testing a new way of giving treatment.

If there are any trials that you can take part in, your doctor will talk to you about them. You can choose not to take part in a trial.

Side effects

Cancer treatments can cause unwanted side effects. These can often be reduced and managed. Your healthcare team will give you advice. Most side effects gradually go away after treatment finishes.

Complementary therapies

There are other therapies that may help you feel better, such as meditation or relaxation. These therapies do not treat cancer. You should always tell your cancer doctor about any other therapies you want to use.

How treatment is planned

Your healthcare team, who are experts in your type of cancer, will plan your treatment. You may need to have tests to find out more about the cancer before treatment starts. When planning your treatment, the doctors will look at:

- the type of cancer you have
- the size of the cancer and whether it has spread
- your general health
- national treatment guidelines.

Your personal preferences are also important.

Make sure you understand the treatment options. Your doctor or nurse should answer any questions you have about the treatment, until you're happy that you understand everything. You will need to give permission (consent) for the doctors to give you the treatment.

It might help to take a relative or friend to appointments with you. They can help you remember what was said. It might also help to take a list of questions that you want to ask and take it to your appointment. You can write down the answers so you remember them.

Making decisions about treatment

There might be more than one possible treatment, so you might be asked to choose between them. You might find this difficult. Talk to your healthcare team to find out:

- what the different treatments will involve
- what the possible side effects of each treatment are
- what the possible advantages and disadvantages of each treatment are.

Your healthcare team will give you time to choose. They can also help you with the decision.

Talking to your healthcare team

Having cancer can be a worrying and confusing time. Talking to your healthcare team can help. Many people feel better and more in control when they know what is happening to them and why.

People often feel that hospital staff are too busy to answer their questions. But it's important for you to understand what's happening and how the cancer and its treatment might affect you. The staff are there to help you. They should make time for your questions. If you don't understand or speak English well, the hospital can arrange an interpreter for you.

You might find some questions difficult to ask your doctor or nurse, especially if they are about personal issues. But your healthcare team are there to help and they are used to answering these questions.

It is important that you understand what you are told. If you don't, ask the doctor or nurse to explain again.

Questions to ask your healthcare team

Here are some questions you may want to ask your healthcare team. They may not all be relevant for you.

- What does my diagnosis mean?
- How advanced is the cancer?
- What will my treatment involve?
- What are the benefits, risks and side effects of each treatment?
- How will the treatment affect my daily life?
- How effective will treatment be?
- Who can I talk to about how I'm feeling?

- Who can I speak to if I think of questions later?
- I have religious or spiritual wishes – will these be met?

Coping with cancer – where to get support

Your emotions

It's common to feel overwhelmed by different feelings when you're told you have cancer. You may feel shocked, scared, worried, angry or depressed. There is no right or wrong way to feel. Talking about how you feel can often help.

Where to get support:

- **Macmillan** – See pages 2 to 3 for all the ways we can help.
- **Counsellors** – A counsellor can help you talk about and find ways to deal with your emotions in a confidential space. Ask your cancer doctor or GP if you'd like counselling.
- **Support groups** – Talking to other people who have cancer may help. Ask your doctor or nurse about groups in your area, or visit macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups

Money, work and travel

There are many ways Macmillan can help if cancer has affected your job or finances. Call us on **0808 808 00 00** to talk about any of these issues.

- We can tell you about benefits you might be entitled to and help you apply for them.
- We can help you with questions about mortgages, pensions, insurance, borrowing and savings.
- We provide grants – payments to help you cope with extra costs caused by cancer. For example, you might be spending more money on your heating bills. A health or social care professional needs to apply for you.
- We can give you information and advice if cancer has affected your work.
- We can give you information about travelling if you have cancer.

Physical changes

Sometimes, cancer or cancer treatments can affect the way your body looks or works. Your doctor or nurse can give you advice about this and the help available. We can also give you information – call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Religion and spirituality

After a cancer diagnosis, some people become more aware of religious beliefs or spiritual feelings. People with a strong religious faith often find this very helpful. Other people may question their faith.

Some people find comfort in prayer or meditation. Many people find it helpful knowing that other people are praying for them.

You can talk to a chaplain, minister, priest, rabbi or other religious leader even if you're not sure about what you believe. Spiritual and religious leaders are used to helping, and you may find peace of mind.

Support for family, friends and carers

People close to you may also have difficult emotions at this time. Our cancer support specialists are here to help everyone affected by cancer, including your relatives and friends. They can call us on **0808 808 00 00**. They can also talk to your healthcare team for support.

A **carer** is someone who gives unpaid support to a relative or friend with cancer who couldn't manage without this help. They might help with personal care, give emotional support or help with housework. If someone is helping to look after you, it's important they get support too. There is lots of help available for them.

They should talk to your doctor or nurse about this, or call Macmillan on **0808 808 00 00**.

Glossary

Benefits – Money paid to you by the government to help you with costs.

Benign – A lump in the body that is not cancer and cannot spread to anywhere else in the body.

Cells – The tiny building blocks that make up the organs and tissues of our body.

Diagnosed – If you are diagnosed with cancer, it means your doctor has found that you have cancer.

Diagnosis – A diagnosis is when your doctor finds out whether you have an illness or not.

Healthcare team – The team of medical experts and other professionals that will look after you.

Lymphatic system – A network of tubes and glands throughout the body. It is part of the immune system. The system fights infections and drains fluid out of our tissue and organs.

Key worker – This person is your main point of contact. You should have their contact details. They can answer your questions and tell you who can help with different things.

Malignant – A lump in the body that is cancer and can spread around the body.

Palliative care – Care given to someone with a cancer that can't be cured. . This may include treatment to shrink the cancer or to reduce symptoms and make someone more comfortable.

Side effects – Unwanted effects of cancer treatment. For example, hair loss, feeling sick or tiredness. Most side effects go away after treatment finishes.

Tumour – A tumour is a group of cells that are growing in an abnormal way. The abnormal cells keep multiplying and form a lump.

More information in other languages

We have information in other languages about these topics:

Types of cancer

- Breast cancer
- Large bowel cancer
- Lung cancer
- Prostate cancer

Treatments

- Chemotherapy
- Radiotherapy
- Surgery

Coping with cancer

- Claiming benefits
- Eating problems and cancer
- End of life
- Fatigue and cancer
- Side effects of cancer treatment
- What you can do to help yourself

To see this information, go to macmillan.org.uk/translations

Speak to us in another language

You can call Macmillan free on **0808 808 00 00** and speak to us in your own language through an interpreter. You can talk to us about your worries and medical questions. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use.

We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm. If you have problems hearing you can use textphone **0808 808 0121** or Text Relay.

References and thanks

The information in this fact sheet is based on the Macmillan booklet **The cancer guide**. We can send you a copy, but the full booklet is only available in English. Information in this fact sheet also comes from the Macmillan website, **macmillan.org.uk**

All of this information has been written and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been reviewed by relevant experts and approved by our medical editor, Dr Tim Iveson, Consultant Medical Oncologist and Macmillan Chief Medical Editor. Thanks also to the people affected by cancer who reviewed this information.

All our information is based on the best evidence available. For more information about the sources we use, please contact us at **bookletfeedback@macmillan.org.uk**

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