

Cancer care in the UK

This information is about cancer care and the UK healthcare system, and where to get help and support.

It can be difficult to know what to expect from the healthcare system in the UK. This page explains your rights and how to access healthcare for cancer and other conditions.

If you have any questions about this information, ask your doctor or nurse at the hospital where you are having treatment.

You can also call Macmillan Cancer Support on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your own language. When you call us, please tell us in English which language you need.

There is more cancer information in other languages at [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

This information is about:

- The UK healthcare system
- If you use another language
- Cancer care in the UK
- Your rights as an NHS patient in the UK
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- Can I choose where I have cancer treatment?
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The UK healthcare system

Most healthcare in the UK is provided by the National Health Service (NHS). The NHS includes:

GP and community-based care

A GP (General Practitioner) is a doctor who treats general health conditions. GPs usually work in a local centre. In English, this type of centre can have different names. It may be called a [GP practice], [GP surgery] or [medical centre]. This centre is often your first and main point of contact for healthcare. They work closely with other community-based services such as district nurses and palliative care teams.

Your GP and other community-based services treat and manage many health problems. If you need more specialised treatment, they can arrange this for you. This is called making a referral.

Urgent and emergency care

This includes:

- emergency help for life-threatening conditions if you phone 999
- care at an accident and emergency (A&E) department, or other urgent care centre such as a walk-in centre or minor injuries unit
- advice about urgent health problems if you call 111 (in England, Scotland or Wales).

Specialist care

For some health conditions, you may need advice or treatment from a healthcare professional with specialist training. When you stay in hospital for specialist treatment, this is called inpatient care. When you have specialist treatment at a clinic, or at home, this is called outpatient care.

Pharmacists

Pharmacists give out medicines and give advice about taking medicines. They may also give some medical advice.

Dental care

Dentists help look after your teeth, gums and other parts of the mouth.

Eye care

Optometrists help test eyesight. They prescribe and fit glasses and contact lenses. They give treatment and advice for some eye health problems, such as eye infections.

Some healthcare in the UK is available privately. Private healthcare is provided by independent companies and is separate to the NHS. You may pay for it yourself, or using medical insurance.

Healthcare services in the UK can vary depending on where you live. This can be confusing. It can be difficult to know what is available in your area and what you should be offered.

If you have questions about your care or the services in your area, ask your GP, or someone else in your healthcare team to explain. Your healthcare team includes any doctors, nurses or other healthcare professionals that look after you. They are there to help you find the care and support you need.

Is NHS healthcare free?

Some NHS services are always free to everyone. You never pay for:

- Emergency help for life-threatening conditions if you phone 999.
- Advice about urgent health problems if you phone 111 (in England, Scotland or Wales).
- Care at an accident and emergency (A&E) department, walk-in centre, minor injuries unit or urgent care centre.
- Testing and treatment for some types of infections and sexually transmitted diseases.
- Contraception services.
- Treatment for conditions caused by torture, female genital mutilation, and domestic or sexual violence.
- Prescriptions, if you live in Scotland.

Most other NHS services are free of charge if you usually live in the UK and are legally allowed to live here. This is called being an ordinary resident. NHS healthcare is also free if you are a refugee or applying for asylum in the UK.

You may still pay for some NHS services, such as dental care and eye care. And in England, you may have to pay for prescriptions in some situations. If you cannot pay for these, you may be able to get help with healthcare costs.

What NHS services do I need to pay for?

Most people have to pay for dental care and eye care. And in England, you may have to pay for prescriptions in some situations. If you cannot pay for these, you may be able to get help with healthcare costs.

Healthcare costs for visitors to the UK

If you do not usually live in the UK or you are visiting from overseas, you may have to pay for NHS healthcare in the UK.

You can have free NHS healthcare in the same way as an ordinary resident if you:

- are a refugee, seeking asylum or a victim of modern slavery or human trafficking
- have paid the immigration health surcharge.

Other visitors may have to pay for NHS healthcare unless it is urgent.

For more information about healthcare for refugees and people seeking asylum see our 'Healthcare for refugees and people seeking asylum' fact sheet at [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

How do I get a GP appointment?

To get a GP appointment, you need to register with a GP practice. You choose the GP practice and contact them to do this.

It is important to register with a GP practice. This is your main point of contact for healthcare services. The practice understands what services are available and how these work in your area. If you need tests or specialist services, the practice can arrange these appointments.

If you use another language

The NHS should offer:

- **A professional interpreter in the language you choose** - Interpreters translate everything your doctor says to you, and everything you want to say back. If you would like an interpreter, tell your GP practice or hospital as soon as possible. The NHS should always use professional interpreters, rather than your family or friends. This means your family can focus on being there to support you to make a decision. It also means there is less risk of getting important information wrong.
- **Translated health information** - Your healthcare team should give you written information about health and care services in a language and format that you understand.

These services are free in the NHS.

Cancer care in the UK

In the UK, cancer care is managed by specialist teams of healthcare professionals. If you are having cancer treatment, you are not likely to meet everyone in the team. But the different healthcare professionals are all there to help plan the care you need.

You should have a main contact person in your healthcare team. They may be called your key worker and they are usually a specialist nurse. You will be given their name and contact details. If you have questions or need advice, they can help.

The team is based at a hospital. They provide care for people in hospital and at outpatient clinics.

You usually have regular appointments with 1 or 2 people from the team who are responsible for your care. Who you meet may depend on the type of treatment you need.

For example, you may meet some of the following people:

- **Surgeon** – a doctor who does operations (surgery).
- **Oncologist** – a doctor who treats people who have cancer.
- **Haematologist** – a doctor who diagnoses and treats blood disorders and cancers.
- **Radiographer** – someone who plans and gives radiotherapy, and supports people during radiotherapy treatment.
- **Clinical nurse specialist (CNS)** – a nurse who gives information about cancer, and support during treatment.

You will often also have help from other services. This can depend on what support you need at different times. For example, if cancer causes walking (mobility) problems, your GP, cancer doctor or specialist nurse may refer you to a physiotherapist. This is someone who gives advice about exercise and mobility. Or, if you have cancer that can be treated but not cured, they may refer you to a palliative care team for more support. Palliative care teams help with symptom control and end-of-life care.

We have more information about cancer care in your language in our fact sheet ‘If you are diagnosed with cancer’. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

Your rights as an NHS patient in the UK

Being treated for cancer can be overwhelming and confusing. It can help to understand what you can expect from your cancer care and NHS staff.

The NHS should be available fairly and equally to everyone. If the treatment you need is not available in your area of the UK, the NHS may arrange for you to have it elsewhere. You should not be treated unfairly or less well because of your:

- age
- disability
- sex
- sexual orientation
- gender reassignment
- marriage or civil partnership
- pregnancy
- race
- religion or belief.

NHS care should be right for each person

Your NHS healthcare team should offer you care, support and information that meets your needs. The team should consider what is important to you, for example your:

- preferences
- culture
- beliefs
- values.

Healthcare professionals should treat you as an individual and respect your privacy and dignity. This may be as simple as asking what name you want to be called. It also means giving you privacy during physical examinations. If you find a situation embarrassing or distressing, tell the doctor or nurse so they can help to make things more comfortable for you.

Your team should involve you in planning and making decisions about your healthcare. They should give you the information and support you need to do this. You have the right to accept or refuse treatment that is offered to you.

Your team should communicate with you in the way that is right for you. You should be given the information you need in a way that you can access and understand. For example:

- **information in a language you understand**
- **Information in a format that you need** - this might mean in audio, Braille, easy read, large print, email, or text
- **support to help you and your team communicate** - this could be an interpreter for British Sign Language (BSL) or another language, or making things easy if you have additional needs. This might include relying on lip reading, using a hearing aid, or needing a low stimulus environment.

NHS care should be as safe and effective as possible

Your NHS healthcare team plans your treatment carefully. The people who give you treatment should have the right skills and training. The place you are cared for should be safe and suitable.

NHS care should be given at the right time

The NHS aims to give treatment within certain timeframes. They aim to assess, diagnose and treat people with cancer or suspected cancer as quickly as possible.

The NHS should keep information about you safe

The NHS collects and saves information about you in your medical or health record. They use this information to give you safe and effective care.

The NHS has strict rules to ensure they keep your information safe, secure and confidential. You can ask for any information the NHS has about you.

Helping your team understand your culture or background

To give you the best care and treatment, your healthcare team should:

- try to understand anything that might affect your decisions about your treatment and care
- make sure you are not disadvantaged, whatever your ethnicity or culture
- make sure that your culture or language do not prevent good communication and understanding between you and your cancer team.

There may be things to do with your culture or background that affect how you feel about your treatment or care.

Sometimes we make assumptions about other people based on what we think we know about them. These ideas or biases can stop us from hearing what the other person really thinks or wants. For example, a healthcare professional may assume you want to be treated in a certain way based on what they think your religion is. These ideas or biases can stop them from understanding what you really think or want.

If your healthcare team are not considering your needs, you can do the following:

- Talk to someone from your team, if it feels safe and comfortable to do so. Sometimes they may not realise that there is a problem. Giving feedback about this may help your team make things right.
- Explain what is happening to someone you trust. You may get support from someone close to you or a healthcare professional you know well. Or you may want to talk to people in a cancer support group or our Online Community. Sometimes it is helpful to talk to people who understand or are in a similar situation.
- Give feedback or make a complaint. If you do not want to be identified, you can give feedback and complaints without giving your name.

Questions about cancer treatment

Can I choose where I have cancer treatment?

You can make choices about where you go for NHS and private healthcare, and which services you use or are referred to. But cancer treatments may only be available at certain hospitals.

The options you can choose from may be different in each area of the UK. They may also depend on how NHS funding works in that area. Your GP, cancer doctor or nurse can give you more information about this.

If you ask to be referred to a specific hospital or cancer specialist, this may affect how long you wait for an appointment. You may wait longer for an appointment with a specialist or to start cancer treatment.

Can I choose what cancer treatment I have?

Decisions about your cancer treatment are made together with your healthcare team. They will not give you a treatment unless you agree to it. This is called giving your consent.

Your team will offer the treatments it thinks are best in your situation. This means the most effective and least harmful treatments available.

If you disagree with the treatment plan you are offered, tell your healthcare team why this is. Ask your healthcare team to explain again why you have been offered these treatments.

Treatment decisions are often complex and based on several factors, including other medical conditions you may have. It is important for you and your healthcare team to understand all these factors. Talking this through carefully and clearly may help you and your healthcare team find a treatment plan that works for you.

If you are not able to make decisions about your treatment, or do not want to, the team should involve someone close to you. This might be members of your family or friends.

Can I get a second opinion?

A second opinion means asking a different GP or cancer doctor whether they agree with your diagnosis or treatment. A diagnosis means finding out if you have an illness or not. A second opinion usually involves going to a different hospital or GP surgery. It is important to think about the possible benefits and disadvantages of getting a second opinion. Talk to your team about how it might affect your wellbeing.

You can ask your cancer doctor to refer you for a second opinion. The NHS does not have to provide a second opinion. But you have the right to ask for one and most doctors will be happy to refer you.

Can I complain about my healthcare?

Many people are happy with the treatment and care they get from healthcare professionals. But sometimes mistakes happen, or things go wrong. If you are unhappy about the treatment you have received, you have the right to complain.

It is usually best to speak to the healthcare professional involved. But you can also speak to someone else in the healthcare team.

If you decide to make a formal complaint, find out about the complaints procedure. This is different in different areas of the UK. Ask your healthcare provider for a copy of the process. Or you can usually find information online.

Getting the right care and support for you

If you have cancer and do not speak English, you may be worried that this will affect your cancer treatment and care. But your healthcare team should offer you care, support and information that meets your needs.

We know that sometimes people may face extra challenges in getting the right support. For example, if you work or have a family it can be hard to find time to go to hospital appointments. You might also have worries about money and transport costs. All of this can be stressful and hard to cope with.

We also offer Macmillan Grants to people with cancer. These are one-off payments that can be used for things like hospital parking, travel costs, childcare or heating bills.

Our free support line **0808 808 00 00** can offer advice, in your language, about your situation. You can speak to nurses, financial guides, welfare rights advisers and work support advisers.

How Macmillan can help you

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

Macmillan Support Line

We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your language. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use. We can help with medical questions, give you information about financial support, or be there to listen if you need someone to talk to. The free, confidential phone line is open 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Macmillan website

Our website has lots of information in English about cancer. There is also more information in other languages at **macmillan.org.uk/translations**

We can also arrange translations just for you. Email us at **cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk** to tell us what you need.

Information centres

Our information and support centres are based in hospitals, libraries and mobile centres. Visit one to get the information you need and speak with someone face to face. Find your nearest centre at **macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres** or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Local support groups

At a support group, you can talk to other people affected by cancer. Find out about support groups in your area at **macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups** or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Macmillan Online Community

You can also talk to other people affected by cancer online at **macmillan.org.uk/community** You can access it at any time of day or night. You can share your experiences, ask questions, or just read through people's posts.

More information in your language

We have information in your language about these topics:

Coping with cancer

- Cancer and coronavirus
- Cancer care in the UK
- Claiming benefits when you have cancer
- Eating problems and cancer
- End of life
- Healthcare for refugees and people seeking asylum
- Healthy eating
- Help with costs when you have cancer
- If you are diagnosed with cancer
- LGBTQ+ people and cancer
- Sepsis and cancer

- Side effects of cancer treatment
- Tiredness (fatigue) and cancer

Types of cancer

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

Treatments

- Chemotherapy
- Radiotherapy
- Surgery

To see this information, go to [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

References and thanks

This information has been written and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been translated into this language by a translation company.

The information included is based on our treatment decisions content available in English on our website.

This information has been reviewed by relevant experts and approved by members of Macmillan's Centre of Clinical Expertise.

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 cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk

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