

Are you worried about cancer?



About this leaflet

This leaflet is for anyone who is worried about cancer. You may know someone who has been diagnosed with cancer. Or you may be concerned about getting cancer and want to know what you can do to reduce your risk.

The leaflet explains:

- what we know about how cancer develops
- what can increase a person's risk of developing cancer
- what you can do to help reduce your risk of developing cancer
- where to get further support.

It talks about the role of genes in developing cancer. But it does not have information about inherited genes that can increase a person's risk of developing cancer.

If you are worried that cancer runs in your family, then you may find it helpful to read our booklet **Cancer and genetics – how cancer sometimes runs in families** (page 24).

How to use this leaflet

This leaflet is split into sections to help you find what you need. You do not have to read it from start to finish. You can use the contents list on page 3 to help you.

It is fine to skip parts of the leaflet. You can always come back to them when you feel ready.

On pages 30 and 31, there are details of other organisations that can help.

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There is also space to write down questions and notes for your doctor or nurse (page 32).

If you find this leaflet helpful, you could pass it on to your family and friends.

Quotes

In this leaflet, we have included quotes from people who have been worried about cancer, which you may find helpful. These are from people who have chosen to share their story with us. To share your experience, visit [macmillan.org.uk/shareyourstory](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/shareyourstory)

For more information

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm, or visit [macmillan.org.uk](https://www.macmillan.org.uk)

If you would prefer to speak to us in another language, interpreters are available. Please tell us, in English, the language you want to use.

If you are deaf or hard of hearing, call us using Relay UK on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the Relay UK app.

We have some information in different languages and formats, including audio, interactive PDFs, easy read, Braille, large print and translations.

To order these, visit [macmillan.org.uk/otherformats](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/otherformats) or call **0808 808 00 00**.

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What causes cancer?

Your body is made up of tiny building blocks called cells. Inside every cell is a set of genes. These are the instructions the cell needs to work properly.

Sometimes the structure of a gene is permanently changed. This change is called a gene variant or alteration. Doctors may call it a gene mutation. It can mean the gene no longer gives the correct instructions.

Lots of gene changes in a cell may mean that eventually the cell stops working normally. Cancer develops when cells like this keep dividing to make more and more abnormal cells.

Gene variants

Most gene variants that lead to cancer happen during a person's lifetime. They are caused by lifestyle and environmental factors. These are called acquired variants. They usually only happen in a group of cells, not in all the cells of the body. It takes a long time for enough variants to occur to cause cancer. This is why cancer is more common in older people.

It is also possible to have a gene variant because it passed from one of your biological parents to you. This is called an inherited variant. Some inherited variants make a person more likely to develop certain types of cancer.

This is not common. Experts think that inherited gene variants cause less than 5 to 10 in 100 (5 to 10%) of all cancers. In fact, the numbers are much lower than this for many cancer types.

It is more common for cancer to be caused by lifestyle factors such as smoking or being overweight.

Understanding your risk of cancer

Most of the time, we do not know why one person gets cancer while someone else does not.

Some things can increase a person's risk of getting cancer. These are called risk factors.

There are some general risk factors for developing cancer. And there are some that increase the risk of developing a specific type of cancer.

Having 1 or more risk factors does not mean you will definitely get cancer. Some factors only increase your risk a small amount. Others are much more likely to cause cancer, such as smoking. You can still develop cancer even if you do not have any known risk factors.

General risk factors

General risk factors for cancer include the following:

- Age – the risk of developing cancer increases as you get older.
- Lifestyle factors – these include smoking, your weight, your diet, how active you are, sun exposure and sunbed use, and how much alcohol you drink. You can read more about how to reduce your risk on pages 8 to 19.
- Family history – certain cancers are more common in some families. We have more information for people with an inherited risk of cancer in our booklet **Cancer and genetics – how cancer sometimes runs in families** (page 24).

There are other risk factors for developing cancer. These may be related to:

- the work you do
- whether you have ever had certain infections
- whether you have low immunity.



Reducing your risk

About 4 in 10 cancers (40%) could be prevented. Living a healthier lifestyle can help reduce your risk. But you cannot reduce your risk of cancer completely. A healthy lifestyle includes:

- not smoking
- keeping to a healthy weight
- eating a healthy diet
- being active
- limiting how much alcohol you drink
- keeping safe in the sun and not using sunbeds.

There are many factors involved in developing cancer. Having a healthy lifestyle does not guarantee that you will not get cancer. But it reduces your risk and improves your general health. It also reduces your risk of other illnesses such as heart disease.

Give up smoking

Smoking is the biggest cause of cancer in the UK. It causes 15 in every 100 cancers (15%). Over 70 in 100 lung cancers (72%) are caused by smoking.

Giving up smoking is the single most important thing you can do for your health. Smoking increases the risk of developing:

- lung cancer
- mouth cancer
- throat cancer.

It also slightly increases the risk of the following cancer types:

- bladder cancer
- kidney cancer
- pancreatic cancer
- bowel cancer
- stomach cancer
- cervical cancer.

Chewing or sucking tobacco is not a safe alternative to smoking cigarettes. If you chew or suck tobacco, you have a higher risk of mouth and oral cancers.

Breathing in other people's smoke (passive smoking) also increases your risk of cancer. Keeping your home smoke-free will protect your and your family's health.

Many people now use e-cigarettes. The long-term effects of e-cigarettes are not yet fully known. E-cigarettes are thought to be a lot safer than tobacco cigarettes. But it is still much better to not smoke at all.

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If you want to give up smoking, it is never too late to stop. Ask your GP for advice, or contact a stop-smoking service.

England

Call the National Smokefree Helpline on **0300 123 1044**. Visit the NHS Better Health website to find out more.

nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking

Scotland

Call Quit Your Way Scotland on **0800 84 84 84**. Or chat online to an adviser.

nhsinform.scot/care-support-and-rights/nhs-services/helplines/quit-your-way-scotland

Wales

Call Help Me Quit on **0800 085 2219**. Or you can complete a 'Request a Callback' form on the website.

helpmequit.wales

Northern Ireland

Stop Smoking Northern Ireland has information and support to help you stop.

stopsmokingni.info

Keep to a healthy weight

After smoking, being overweight is the second biggest cause of cancer. It increases the risk of many types of cancer, including cancers of the:

- bowel
- kidney
- womb
- gullet (oesophagus).

The risk of breast cancer is higher in people who are overweight, particularly after the menopause.

Keeping to a healthy weight reduces your risk of cancer and other health problems, such as heart disease and diabetes.

Here are some tips to help you keep to a healthy weight:

- Eat a healthy diet with lots of fruit and vegetables and less fat and sugar.
- Only eat as much food as you need, depending on how active you are.
- Be more physically active.

If you are worried about your weight or need more information, talk to your GP or a dietitian.

Eat a healthy diet

There is no single food that causes or prevents cancer.

Eating a balanced diet is good for your overall health and helps reduce your risk of some cancers. It can also help you keep to a healthy weight.

For most people, a balanced diet includes:

- lots of fruit and vegetables
- starchy foods (carbohydrates), such as bread, rice, pasta, noodles, couscous and potatoes
- some protein-rich foods, such as meat, poultry, fish, nuts, eggs and pulses (beans and lentils)
- some milk and dairy foods, such as cheese, yoghurt and cream, or dairy alternatives such as soya milk
- a small amount of food high in fat, salt or sugar.



You should mainly drink water, tea and coffee (without sugar) or sugar-free drinks.

Eating plenty of high-fibre foods helps reduce the risk of bowel cancer. High-fibre foods include:

- wholegrain bread
- brown rice
- oats
- beans
- peas
- lentils
- grains
- seeds
- fruit and vegetables.

Potatoes with their skins on are also a good source of fibre.

Try to limit how much red and processed meat you eat. These are linked to a higher risk of bowel and prostate cancer. Red meat is beef, pork, lamb and veal. Processed meats include sausages, bacon, salami, tinned meats, and packet meats such as the ham you have in sandwiches.

You can find more detailed information about diet and cancer risk on the World Cancer Research Fund website. Visit **wcrf-uk.org**

Be physically active

Regular physical activity can help reduce the risk of some cancers. Physical activity is also good for your general health and well-being. Each week, you should try to do at least 150 minutes of moderate activity or 75 minutes of vigorous activity.

Moderate activity raises your heartbeat and makes your breathing faster. It includes things like:

- brisk walking
- riding a bike
- dancing.

Vigorous activity makes you breathe hard and not be able to say much without taking a breath. It includes:

- running
- swimming
- walking up the stairs.

If you are not used to doing exercise, ask your GP for advice about getting started. You can find more information about keeping active on the following websites:

- England – [nhs.uk/live-well/exercise](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise)
- Scotland – [nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/keeping-active](https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/keeping-active)
- Wales – [gov.wales/physical-activity-health](https://www.gov.wales/physical-activity-health)
- Northern Ireland – [nidirect.gov.uk/articles/physical-activity](https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/physical-activity)



Limit how much alcohol you drink

Drinking alcohol increases your risk of mouth and throat cancers. It is also linked to the following cancers:

- gullet (oesophageal) cancer
- bowel cancer
- liver cancer
- breast cancer.

In general, the more you drink, the higher your risk. Your risk is higher if you also smoke.

Current guidelines say:

- do not drink more than 14 units of alcohol in a week
- spread the amount you drink in a week over 3 or more days
- try to have several alcohol-free days every week.

There is no safe level of drinking alcohol. But sticking to these guidelines reduces your risk of damaging your health.

Remember, the number of units you are drinking depends on the size and strength of your drink:

- Half a pint of lower-strength (3 to 4%) beer, lager or cider contains 1 unit.
- Half a pint of higher-strength (5%) beer, lager or cider contains 1½ units.
- A standard glass of wine (175ml), often called a small glass in pubs and bars, contains around 2 units.
- A large glass of wine (250ml) contains 3 units.
- A single measure (25ml) of 40% spirits contains 1 unit.

You can find more information about alcohol and drinking guidelines at **drinkaware.co.uk**

Take care in the sun

Spending some time outside helps you stay healthy. Our bodies need sunlight to make vitamin D. This is important for bone health and reduces the risk of some illnesses.

But it is important to protect your skin from too much sun. This is because too much sun can increase your risk of skin cancer. If you have white or pale skin or do not tan easily, you should avoid letting your skin go pink or red in the sun. If you have black or brown skin, the signs of sun damage may not be as obvious, but you should still protect your skin in the sun.

Here are some tips to help you stay safe in the sun:

- Wear clothes made of fabric that does not let sunlight through. Make sure they cover your body, arms and legs.
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat that protects your face, ears and neck.
- Wear sunglasses with wide wraparound lenses or wide arms, and with either the:

- CE Mark



- British Standard Mark 12312-1:2013 E.



- Stay in the shade when you can, especially between 11am and 3pm.
- Use a suncream with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30.

Using sunbeds or sunlamps also increases your risk of skin cancer. If you want to look tanned, use fake tan lotions or sprays.

Viruses and risk of cancer

A small number of viruses have been linked to a higher risk of certain types of cancer. These viruses include:

- HPV, which increases the risk of cervical cancer and is linked to cancers of the head and neck, anus, vulva, vagina and penis
- hepatitis B and C, which are linked to liver cancer
- HIV, which can increase the risk of cancers including lymphoma and sarcoma.

There is a vaccine to protect against HPV. This is given to children aged 12 to 13 as part of the NHS vaccination programme.

If you have an increased risk of cancer caused by HPV, you may be able to have an HPV vaccine. Your GP, local sexual health clinic or HIV clinic can give you more information.

Using condoms and dental dams during sex can help protect you from some viruses.

If you inject drugs, it is important to never share needles. This is because viruses can pass from person to person in the blood.

“ I encourage all women to attend their screening mammogram appointment. The short time of possible discomfort is a small price to pay for a better chance to live a long, healthy life. ”

Lurline

Cancer screening

Screening uses tests to find:

- cancer early, when treatment is most effective
- changes that may develop into cancer so these can be treated to prevent cancer developing.

In the UK, there are screening programmes for cancers of the bowel, breast and cervix. Taking part in these programmes reduces your risk of these cancers. If you are registered with a GP, you will usually be invited to take part and have screening tests when needed.

You can read more about screening in the different countries of the UK:

- England – [nhs.uk/conditions/nhs-screening](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/nhs-screening)
- Scotland – [nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/screening](https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/screening)
- Wales – phw.nhs.wales/services-and-teams/screening
- Northern Ireland – cancerscreening.hscni.net

If you are transgender or non-binary, it is important to know what types of screening are right for your body. Cancer Research UK has detailed information about what types of screening trans and non-binary people need.

This includes information for people taking gender-affirming hormone treatments or who have had gender-affirming surgery. Visit [cancerresearchuk.org](https://www.cancerresearchuk.org)

Know your body

Knowing your body and what is normal for you will help you be aware of any changes.

People sometimes feel embarrassed talking about a change in their body or think it is not worth bothering their GP about. But it is always better to get it checked. Always talk to your GP if you have symptoms that are ongoing, unexplained or unusual for you.

We have more information about the signs and symptoms of cancer on our website. Visit **macmillan.org.uk/signs-and-symptoms-of-cancer**





About our information

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

Our information has the PIF Tick quality mark for trusted health information. This means our information has been through a professional and strong production process.

Order what you need

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

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

Online information

All our information is also available online at **macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support** You can also find videos featuring 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
- interactive PDFs
- large print
- translations.

Find out more at **macmillan.org.uk/otherformats**

If you would like us to produce information in a different format for you, email us at **informationproductionteam@macmillan.org.uk** or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

The language we use

We want everyone affected by cancer to feel our information is written for them.

We try to make sure our information is as clear as possible. We use plain English, avoid jargon, explain any medical words, use illustrations to explain text, and make sure important points are highlighted clearly.

We use gender-inclusive language and talk to our readers as 'you' so that everyone feels included. Where clinically necessary we use the terms 'men' and 'women' or 'male' and 'female'. For example, we do so when talking about parts of the body or mentioning statistics or research about who is affected. Our aims are for our information to be as clear and relevant as possible for everyone.

You can read more about how we produce our information at **macmillan.org.uk/ourinfo**

Other ways we can help you

At Macmillan, we know how a cancer diagnosis can affect everything, and we are 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 support line is made up of specialist teams who can help you with:

- emotional and practical support if you or someone you know has been diagnosed with cancer
- clinical information from our nurses about things like diagnosis and treatments from our nurse specialists
- welfare rights advice, for information about benefits and general money worries.

To contact any of our teams, call the Macmillan Support Line for free on **0808 808 00 00**. Or visit [macmillan.org.uk/support-line](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/support-line) to chat online and see the options and opening times.

Our trained cancer information advisers can listen and signpost you to further support.

Our cancer information nurse specialists can talk you through information about your diagnosis and treatment. They can help you understand what to expect from your diagnosis and provide information to help you manage symptoms and side effects.

If you are deaf or hard of hearing, call us using Relay UK on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the Relay UK app.

You can also email us, or use the Macmillan Chat Service via our website. You can use the chat service to ask our advisers about anything that is worrying you. Tell them what you would like to talk about so they can direct your chat to the right person. Click on the 'Chat to us' button, which appears on pages across the website. Or go to

macmillan.org.uk/talktous

If you would like to talk to someone in a language other than English, we also offer an interpreter service for our Macmillan Support Line. Call **0808 808 00 00** and say, in English, the language you want to use. Or send us a web chat message saying you would like an interpreter. Let us know the language you need and we'll arrange for an interpreter to contact you.

Macmillan Information and Support 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. If you would like a private chat, most centres have a room where you can speak with someone confidentially.

Find your nearest centre at **macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres** or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Help with money worries

Our cancer information nurse specialists can talk you through information about your diagnosis and treatment. They can help you understand what to expect from your diagnosis and provide information to help you manage symptoms and side effects.

Financial advice

Our expert money advisers on the Macmillan Support Line can help you deal with money worries and recommended other useful organisations that can help.

Help accessing benefits

You can speak to our money advisers for more information. Call us free on **0808 808 00 00**. Visit **[macmillan.org.uk/financialsupport](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/financialsupport)** for more information about benefits.

Help with work and cancer

Whether you are an employee, a carer, an employer or are self-employed, we can provide support and information to help you manage cancer at work. Visit **[macmillan.org.uk/work](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/work)**

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 is why we help bring people together in their communities and online.

Support groups

Whether you are someone living with cancer or a carer, family member or friend, 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**

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**

You can also use our Ask an Expert service on the Online Community. You can ask a money adviser, cancer information nurse or an information and support adviser any questions you have.

Macmillan healthcare professionals

Our nurses, doctors and other health and social care professionals give expert care and support to individuals and their families. Call us or ask your GP, consultant, district nurse or hospital ward sister if there are any Macmillan professionals near you.

Other useful organisations

There are lots of other organisations that can give you information or support. Details correct at time of printing.

General health information

Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland

www.northerntrust.hscni.net

Provides information about health and social care services in Northern Ireland.

NHS.UK

www.nhs.uk

The UK's biggest health information website. Has service information for England.

NHS 111 Wales

www.nhs.wales

NHS health information site for Wales.

NHS Inform

Helpline **0800 22 44 88**

www.nhsinform.scot

NHS health information site for Scotland.

Patient

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 leaflet has been written, revised and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been approved by our Senior Medical Editor, Dr Marc Tischkowitz, Reader and Honorary Consultant Physician in Medical Genetics.

With thanks to: Shirley Hodgson, Professor of Cancer Genetics; Jacquie Peck, Clinical Nurse Specialist; and Sara Rose, Genetic Counsellor.

Thanks also to the people affected by cancer who reviewed this edition, and those who shared their stories.

We welcome feedback on our information. If you have any, please contact informationproductionteam@macmillan.org.uk

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Sources

Below is a sample of the sources used in our information for people who are worried about cancer. If you would like more information about the sources we use, please contact us at **informationproductionteam@macmillan.org.uk**

Action on smoking and health. Briefing: electronic cigarettes. Dec 2018. Available from: ash.org.uk/uploads/E-Cigarettes-Briefing_PDF_v1.pdf [accessed May 2022].

Brown, K.F., Rungay, H., Dunlop, C. et al. The fraction of cancer attributable to modifiable risk factors in England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the United Kingdom in 2015. *Br J Cancer* 118, 1130–1141 (2018). Available from: doi.org/10.1038/s41416-018-0029-6 [accessed May 2022].

Cancer Research UK. Cancer risk statistics. Available from: cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/cancer-statistics/risk#heading-One [accessed May 2022].

Can you do something to help?

We hope this leaflet has been useful to you. It is just one of our many publications that are available free to anyone affected by cancer. They are produced by our cancer information specialists who, along with our nurses, money advisers, campaigners and volunteers, are part of the Macmillan team. When people are facing the toughest fight of their lives, we are here to support them every step of the way.

We want to make sure no one has to go through cancer alone, so we need more people to help us. When the time is right for you, here are some ways in which you can become a part of our team.

5 ways you can help someone with cancer

1. Share your cancer experience

Support people living with cancer by telling your story, online, in the media or face to face.

2. Campaign for change

We need your help to make sure everyone gets the right support. Take an action, big or small, for better cancer care.

3. Help someone in your community

A lift to an appointment. Help with the shopping.
Or just a cup of tea and a chat. Could you lend a hand?

4. Raise money

Whatever you like doing you can raise money to help. Take part in one of our events or create your own.

5. Give money

Big or small, every penny helps.
To make a one-off donation see over.

Please fill in your personal details

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Other

Name

Surname

Address

Postcode

Phone

Email

Please accept my gift of £
(Please delete as appropriate)

I enclose a cheque / postal order /
Charity Voucher made payable to
Macmillan Cancer Support

OR debit my:

Visa / MasterCard / CAF Charity
Card / Switch / Maestro

Card number

Valid from

Expiry date

Issue no

Security number

Signature

Date / /

Do not let the taxman keep your money

Do you pay tax? If so, your gift will be worth 25% more to us – at no extra cost to you. All you have to do is tick the box below, and the tax office will give 25p for every pound you give.

I am a UK tax payer and I would like Macmillan Cancer Support to treat all donations I make or have made to Macmillan Cancer Support in the last 4 years as Gift Aid donations, until I notify you otherwise.

I understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations in that tax year it is my responsibility to pay any difference. I understand Macmillan Cancer Support will reclaim 25p of tax on every £1 that I give.

Macmillan Cancer Support and our trading companies would like to hold your details in order to contact you about our fundraising, campaigning and services for people affected by cancer. If you would prefer us not to use your details in this way please tick this box.

In order to carry out our work we may need to pass your details to agents or partners who act on our behalf.

If you would rather donate online go to macmillan.org.uk/donate



Registered with
**FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR**



Please cut out this form and return it in an envelope (no stamp required) to: Supporter donations, Freepost RUCY-XGCA-XTHU, Macmillan Cancer Support, PO Box 791, York House, York YO1 0NJ

This booklet is for anyone who is worried about cancer. You may know someone who has been diagnosed with cancer. Or you may be concerned about your own cancer risk.

The booklet explains what we know about how cancer develops and what can increase a person's risk of developing cancer. It talks about what you can do to reduce your risk of developing cancer and where to get further support.

At Macmillan we know cancer can disrupt your whole life. We'll do whatever it takes to help everyone living with cancer in the UK get the support they need right now, and transform cancer care for the future.

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 Relay UK on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the Relay UK app.

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

The logo consists of a blue rounded rectangle containing the text 'Trusted Information Creator' in black. To the right of the text is a large green checkmark.

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Information
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Patient Information Forum