

Cancer and complementary therapies



About this booklet

This booklet is about complementary therapies. There are many different types of complementary therapy. This booklet is about the most common types used by some people with cancer. It is for anyone who has cancer and who wants to know more about cancer and complementary therapies.

We hope it gives a balanced view of what may be available and what is involved.

We cannot give advice about the best treatment for you. You should talk to your healthcare team if you plan to use a complementary therapy or are already using a complementary therapy. It is also important to tell a complementary therapist that you have cancer.

Your healthcare team may advise you not to have complementary therapies. This is because some therapies are not safe if you have certain types of cancer or are having certain cancer treatments. Your healthcare team can tell you more.

This booklet is also available as an audiobook. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/audiobooks](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/audiobooks) or call **0808 808 00 00**

How to use this booklet

This booklet 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.

On pages 94 to 102, there are details of other organisations that can help. There is also space to write down questions and notes for your doctor or nurse (pages 103 to 104).

If you find this booklet helpful, you could pass it on to your family and friends. They may also want information to help them support you.

Quotes

In this booklet, we have included quotes from people who have used complementary therapies. 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, easy read, Braille, large print, interactive PDFs 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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About complementary therapies

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Understanding different terms

You may already be familiar with complementary therapies and alternative therapies. Here we answer questions you may have and explain some different terms you may come across.

What are conventional medical treatments?

Conventional medical treatments are the medical treatments doctors use to treat people with cancer. They include:

- surgery
- radiotherapy
- chemotherapy
- hormonal therapy
- targeted therapy
- immunotherapy.

These treatments cure many cancers. Even when they cannot cure a cancer, they can often shrink the cancer. This can help people live for longer or reduce their symptoms.

Conventional medical treatments for cancer are scientifically tested and researched using clinical trials. This means we know how safe and effective they are, and whether they have side effects. This is called evidence-based medicine.

In this booklet, we also call conventional medical treatments 'cancer treatments'.

Our website has more information about cancer treatments. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/treatments-and-drugs](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/treatments-and-drugs)



What does CAM stand for?

CAM stands for complementary and alternative medicine. But there are important differences between them.

Complementary therapies

Complementary therapies are treatments that people may use with, or as well as, conventional medical treatments. Complementary therapies should not claim that they can treat or cure cancer. People may use complementary therapies to help them feel better, physically or emotionally. Or they may use them to help manage cancer symptoms or the side effects of cancer treatments.

There are many different complementary therapies.

Some of these have been scientifically tested to see how safe and effective they are, and whether they have side effects. For some therapies, there is good evidence for their use in certain situations. But there are other therapies where it is not so clear. This is because:

- studies may be small
- studies can give different results
- other factors may be helping with the side effects or symptoms of cancer – this may be instead of, or as well as, the complementary therapy.

Complementary therapies should be used with conventional medical treatments.

In a hospital, complementary therapists may work closely with other professionals to support a person's well-being while they are having conventional treatments.

Alternative therapies

Alternative therapies (pages 72 to 85) are treatments that people use instead of conventional medical treatments. Some alternative therapies claim to treat, or even cure, cancer.

Most alternative therapies are not scientifically tested and researched like conventional medical treatments. Some have been tested. But no alternative therapy has been proven to cure cancer or slow its growth. Some may even be harmful.

We do not recommend using an alternative therapy instead of conventional cancer treatment. Doing this could reduce the chances of curing a cancer or living longer with cancer.

“ I was offered help by Macmillan Information and Support services, such as complementary therapies, including reflexology and massage during treatment. ”

Linda, diagnosed with Waldenstrom's non-Hodgkin lymphoma

Why do people use complementary therapies?

There are many reasons why people use complementary therapies. Some people find it helpful to try different therapies to help them feel better while they are having cancer treatment.

Some people find that complementary therapies help them:

- cope with the stress of cancer and its treatments
- relax and feel better emotionally
- sleep better
- cope with some cancer symptoms
- cope with some side effects of cancer treatments
- feel more in control.

For some people, using complementary therapies can be a positive way of looking after themselves and improving their quality of life.

Some people build a strong relationship with their complementary therapist, which can be another benefit.

You can do some complementary therapies as part of a group. This can be a good way to meet other people with similar experiences, in a positive setting.

Choosing a complementary therapy

When choosing a complementary therapy, you might want to think about:

- what you would like
- how it might help you
- where the treatment is available
- any safety issues
- how much it costs
- where you can get more information.

“ I built up a rapport with my reiki therapist, and it got to the point where she knew before I said anything whether I was okay or not. ”

Angie, diagnosed with breast cancer

If you would like to know what complementary therapies other people have found helpful, you could try the following:

- Contact a local cancer support group. Ask your healthcare team about support groups in your area or visit **macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups**
- Join our Online Community to read about people's experiences – visit **macmillan.org.uk/community**

We cannot advise you whether you should use a complementary therapy, or which therapy to use.

Your preferences

People use complementary therapies for different reasons. To help you decide what is best for you, it may help to think about what you want from the complementary therapy.

You may want to:

- feel more relaxed
- get help with managing symptoms or side effects
- get help with difficult emotions
- feel generally better
- make a positive lifestyle change.

You may also want to think about:

- how much you have to pay, if anything
- whether you want a one-off treatment, or to do something regularly.

Safety

Doctors are usually understanding if their patients wish to use complementary therapies. If you plan to use one, it is important to talk to your cancer doctor or specialist nurse. This is because some therapies may not be suitable if you are having certain cancer treatments.

For example, some herbal medicines, supplements and other products can affect how some cancer treatments work. Just because they are 'natural' does not mean they cannot interact with a cancer treatment.

Ask your healthcare team whether the treatment you would like could:

- affect your cancer treatment
- make your cancer treatment less effective
- make side effects of your cancer treatment worse.

If you already use a complementary therapy, make sure you tell your cancer doctor about it before you start cancer treatment. This is especially important if you are taking herbs, pills or medicines.

Before using a complementary therapy, it is also important to tell the complementary therapist that you have cancer. This could affect the treatment or advice they give you. Some therapists may not treat someone with cancer if they have not had training to help them work safely with you.

It is important not to use a therapist who claims to treat, prevent or cure cancer with complementary or alternative therapies. No responsible therapist would do this. There is no medical evidence to support these claims.



“After my free sessions I was offered the chance to pay for treatment at the centre. This I did, gratefully. It had become a safe place for me and I benefitted from the treatment immensely. ”

Angie, diagnosed with breast cancer

Cost

Some complementary therapies are free through the NHS, some cancer information and support centres or large cancer charities. Complementary therapies may be available at your hospital, hospice or GP surgery. You can ask your cancer doctor or specialist nurse about this. Some cancer support groups offer therapies free of charge, or at a reduced cost.

Complementary therapies can be expensive. The costs can vary a lot, so check how much you need to pay before you start treatment, especially if you are having a course of treatment. If you have any form of complementary medicine, you may need to pay for this as well as your time with the therapist.

Some therapists may offer a reduced cost based on your ability to pay. There are also organisations that can tell you what the usual costs of complementary therapies are (pages 94 to 99).

Macmillan has Information and Support Centres throughout the UK. Find your nearest centre at [macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres) or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Finding information

Make sure you have the information you need about the complementary therapy you are interested in. Talk about it with your cancer doctor or specialist nurse. You can also contact an organisation for people giving the therapy. There are organisations for different complementary therapies (pages 94 to 98).

You could ask to have a meeting with the complementary therapist. They can explain how they think the therapy could help you. You might find it helpful to take a family member or friend with you. It can also help to write down any questions that you want to ask before you go. After you have met the therapist, take time to decide whether you want to go ahead with the therapy.

Call the Macmillan Support Line on **0808 808 00 00** for more information about complementary and alternative therapies.

You can also get information from library books and online. But be careful when choosing what to read or believe on the internet. Some books and websites make claims that are not supported by evidence. Others may be selling products to make money.

“ The absolutely top thing for me was complementary therapy. I cannot stress enough the importance of this service. ”

Angie, diagnosed with breast cancer

Choosing a complementary therapist

When you choose a complementary therapist, it is best to find someone who is on a register. This will help make sure the person you choose meets certain standards.

There are 2 types of register:

- Accredited register – membership of these is voluntary. There are many accredited registers for different types of complementary therapies. A therapist on an accredited register may have a quality mark. This may be displayed on a certificate of qualification, or in their place of work.
- Statutory register – these are regulated by UK law. Healthcare professionals such as nurses, doctors and pharmacists must be on the register for their profession to be able to practise.

People on both types of register should meet national standards of practice for issues such as:

- training
- safety
- confidentiality
- complaints.

Everyone on the register must follow the register's code of conduct. If you have any concerns about the conduct of a therapist, you can contact their register. They should deal with complaints fairly and as quickly as possible.

The Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) has a voluntary register of people working in some complementary therapies in the UK (page 96).

Organisations for different therapies (pages 94 to 98) may also have registers of therapists in that particular treatment.

The Professional Standards Authority also accredits registers for many complementary therapy organisations (page 98).

Tips for choosing a therapist

Before choosing a private therapist, check what services your hospital provides. Remember that some healthcare professionals are trained in complementary therapies.

When choosing a complementary therapist:

- always use a qualified therapist who is on a statutory or accredited register
- ask how many years of training they have had and how long they have been practising
- ask what training and experience they have had with complementary therapies and cancer
- ask if they have indemnity insurance, in case of harm from complementary therapy side effects
- ask how much they charge
- be careful not to be misled by false promises – no trustworthy therapist would claim to be able to treat or cure cancer.

You should feel comfortable with the therapist. Before you have the therapy, they may ask you about your health, diet and lifestyle. This will help them to decide if they need to adapt the treatment to meet your needs. They may ask you to get permission from your cancer doctor before starting treatment.

If you ever feel uncomfortable or unhappy with your therapist, you have the right to stop your treatment at any time.



Complementary therapies

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Types of complementary therapy

There are many types of complementary therapy.

Therapies can be grouped in different ways. Some may fit into more than 1 group. The main groups are:

- mind-body therapies
- massage and other touch therapies
- acupuncture
- homeopathy
- therapies using herbs and plants
- therapies using supplements or diet.

“ I welcomed everything that I was offered – reiki, massage, healing, support groups. My attitude was ‘give me everything’. Of course, the complementary therapies were in addition to (not an alternative to) the life-saving chemo and radiotherapy I underwent. ,,

Rosie, diagnosed with tongue and throat cancer

Mind-body therapies

Mind-body therapies are based on the belief that what we think and feel can affect how our bodies function. They have no effect on the cancer, but they may be used to help support people with cancer. They may help a person feel relaxed and improve their sense of well-being.

The mind-body therapies used by people with cancer in the UK include:

- relaxation techniques (page 27)
- meditation (page 28)
- mindfulness (pages 29 to 30)
- hypnotherapy (pages 30 to 31)
- sophrology (page 31)
- creative therapies, such as art therapy, creative writing and music therapy (pages 32 to 34)
- movement therapies, such as yoga and tai chi (pages 36 to 37).

Mind-body therapies may help you feel less anxious, improve your mood and help you sleep. They may also help with symptoms such as pain, or help you cope with side effects caused by cancer treatment.

You may need to practise mind-body techniques regularly over a period of time to get the best results. You may find it helpful to attend a group session to do the techniques. You can encourage each other to keep practising and feel the progress you are making.

Mind-body therapies may be available:

- in some cancer treatment centres
- in some cancer support centres
- through a cancer support group.

You can ask your healthcare team how to access them.

Relaxation

Relaxation can help reduce stress and anxiety. Different techniques can help calm the mind and reduce muscle tension:

- Breathing exercises help you focus on taking slow, deep, even breaths.
- Progressive muscle relaxation trains you to tense and relax each group of muscles in turn, until your whole body is relaxed.
- Guided imagery involves focusing on pleasant images to replace negative or stressful feelings. For example, you might imagine that the sun is shining on you, warming you and giving you strength. Guided imagery is sometimes called visualisation.

2 or more relaxation techniques can be used together.

Other therapies such as meditation, hypnotherapy, yoga and tai chi can also promote relaxation and may also help with fatigue.

We have more information about fatigue in our booklet

Coping with fatigue (tiredness) – page 88 – and on our website.

Visit [macmillan.org.uk/tired](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/tired)

Almost everyone can use relaxation techniques. You can learn them:

- in one-to-one sessions
- as part of a group
- at home using an app, CD, or online resource.

Meditation

Meditation has been practised for many years in different parts of the world. It usually involves being still and focusing your mind. This can help relax the mind and help you feel calm. Over time, this can help reduce stress levels. During meditation you become aware of your feelings, thoughts, and the sensations in your body. You are encouraged to allow your thoughts to come and go.

Benefits of meditation can include:

- feeling relaxed
- feeling less anxious or depressed
- feeling less stressed
- helping to manage chronic pain
- having an improved sense of well-being.

There are different types of meditation techniques. Meditation is sometimes related to faith or religion, such as Buddhist meditation.

You can read more about meditation on the NHS Better Health website. Visit [nhs.uk/better-health](https://www.nhs.uk/better-health)

Mindfulness

A common type of meditation is mindfulness. This type of meditation can help people manage problems such as anxiety, stress or chronic pain.

Mindfulness helps you bring your attention back to the present moment. It helps you to become aware of your physical sensations, thoughts and feelings. It encourages you to think about these with a kind and curious awareness, and without making judgements. This can help you spend less time worrying about the future or going back over the past.

There are different types of mindfulness, including:

- mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)
- mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT)
- mindful self-compassion (MSC).

MBSR is a course of mindfulness sessions using:

- meditation
- yoga
- body awareness
- behavioural awareness
- emotional awareness.

MBCT uses some mindfulness techniques with some cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques. CBT is a talking therapy that can help you manage your problems by changing the way you behave and think.

MSC is a course that teaches you to use mindfulness to be aware of how you are feeling. You learn to respond to yourself and your difficulties with kindness and compassion.

Mindfulness classes may be available through your hospital, GP or a cancer support charity. There are also organisations that can help you find meditation classes or mindfulness courses (pages 94 to 98).

There are apps, CDs and online resources you can use to meditate at home. Some people find it helpful to meditate in a group until they are familiar with the technique.

Meditation and mindfulness are generally suitable for anyone. But people who have a mental health issue should check with their doctor before trying meditation. Not everyone finds meditation helpful. In a few people, it can make symptoms such as stress or anxiety worse.

You can read more about meditation and mindfulness on the NHS website. Visit [nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness)

Hypnotherapy

With hypnotherapy, a therapist works with you to create a relaxed state of mind. This makes you less aware of your surroundings and more open to suggestions or invitations. The therapist makes suggestions which encourage you to have more positive beliefs.

Hypnotherapy can help you cope with specific phobias, such as a fear of needles. It can also encourage positive emotions, such as calmness and relaxation. Many people use hypnotherapy to help them make lifestyle changes, such as giving up smoking.

It may be used to help manage side effects of cancer treatment. These include nausea and vomiting, pain and hot flushes. But there is not enough evidence for doctors to recommend it as the main treatment for these problems.

You are always in control and can stop the session at any time by simply opening your eyes.

Hypnotherapy is not suitable for everyone. Check with your GP if hypnotherapy is safe for you to use.

Sophrology

Sophrology uses a combination of gentle body movements, relaxation, breathing and visualisation. The aim is to restore balance between your mind and body. This may help in:

- reducing stress and anxiety
- managing pain
- improving sleep
- managing difficult or challenging situations.

You can read more about sophrology on the Sophrology Academy website (page 98). It has a directory of sophrologists in the UK.

Creative therapies

Creative therapies use different arts to promote well-being. They may also help people cope with life's challenges.

Art therapy

Art therapy involves working with an art therapist using materials to create something that means something to you. For example, this may be through painting, drawing or making something. It can help you:

- explore your feelings
- express yourself
- feel less anxious
- improve your self-confidence.

An art therapist may have training in psychotherapy as well as art therapy. Psychotherapy is where you talk to a person trained to help you manage difficult emotions, experiences or situations. There are different types of psychotherapy.

You can have art therapy in a one-to-one session with the therapist or in a group. You do not need to be able to draw or paint to take part.

Being creative may help you become more aware of difficult feelings and let go of them. You can then discuss these feelings in counselling or group sessions, if you want to.

Art therapy is not widely available for cancer patients on the NHS. The British Association for Art Therapists (BAAT) has more information (page 95).

Creative writing

Creative writing is another way you can express your feelings. It is something you can do on your own. Or you may want to join a group.

Creative writing can include writing stories, poems or your memoirs. Or you may want to journal your experience or express your feelings. You do not have to be good with words to do creative writing. Creative writing may help improve your mood and emotional well-being.

Some support groups and cancer support centres offer creative writing workshops.



Music therapy

Music therapy aims to improve your physical and emotional well-being using music. You do not need to be able to play an instrument or read music. You can do music therapy on your own or as a group.

Music therapists are trained professionals who work in a variety of settings. During the session, you work with instruments to help you express your feelings.

Music therapy has been shown to help relieve symptoms, such as pain. It may also help reduce anxiety, depression and fatigue.

Music therapy is not widely available for people with cancer on the NHS. You can learn more about music therapy from the British Association for Music Therapy (BAMT) – page 95.



Movement therapies

Movement therapies work directly on your body. They use movement, breathing exercises and a type of meditation or relaxation.

Yoga

Yoga uses a combination of techniques. It generally uses different physical postures. It often combines these with breathing and relaxation techniques, and meditation. There are different types of yoga. Some use very gentle movement. Others may involve more energetic movement.

It is important to tell your yoga teacher that you have cancer. Yoga is generally safe, but people with some types of cancer may need to change some of the positions to make them easier to do. Yoga may help you cope with cancer and feel better generally. It may help to reduce sleep problems and fatigue, and may also help reduce depression and anxiety.

Most research has looked at the use of yoga in people with breast cancer. There is some evidence that for people with breast cancer, short-term use of yoga may:

- improve quality of life
- reduce fatigue and sleep problems.

Tai chi and qigong

Tai chi and qigong (sometimes spelt chi kung) come from Chinese medical traditions.

Both tai chi and qigong use slow, fluid movements together with meditation and deep breathing. These exercises can help build strength and improve balance and flexibility. They are suitable for most people. Tai chi and qigong may help you feel better generally and also reduce tiredness.

“Yoga has become a new passion for me. I decided to practise daily at home. I’ve got books on the subject and an app on my phone. ”

Diana, diagnosed with breast cancer

Massage therapies

Massage therapy involves a person applying gentle pressure to your body by stroking, kneading, holding or tapping it. It can be very relaxing for both your mind and body.

Massage therapy may be available in cancer support centres, hospices, community health services and some GP surgeries. As well as specialist massage therapists, some healthcare professionals such as nurses or physiotherapists are trained in massage therapy.

A massage therapist can massage the whole body, or focus on 1 area such as the hands, face, shoulders or feet. This means you do not always need to remove any clothing to have a massage.

How massage therapy can help

Massage can be used to:

- relax your mind and body
- improve your mood
- relieve tension and pain in muscles or tissue
- improve circulation.

Some studies of people with cancer suggest that massage therapy may also help reduce anxiety, depression and fatigue.

Having massage therapy

There are different types of massage therapy. Massages can be soft and gentle, or more energetic.

Cancer doctors and complementary therapists usually advise you to try gentle massage and avoid vigorous, deep tissue massage. This type of massage may be uncomfortable and could be unsafe for you. Your massage therapist can change the pressure to make sure the massage is comfortable for you.

Some people are worried that having a massage might cause cancer cells to spread to other parts of the body. Research has not found any evidence of this, but massage therapists will avoid any areas affected by cancer. Talk to your cancer doctor or specialist nurse if you are worried. You can discuss with your massage therapist where you would like to have a massage and what they suggest will be comfortable and safe for you.

A massage therapist can sometimes teach family members or friends simple massage techniques, so they can support you at home.

Massages can last for different lengths of time. Talk to your massage therapist about how long might be best for you. During cancer treatment, they may advise you not to have a massage that lasts longer than 20 minutes.

Some people may be offered a massage using aromatherapy oils. We have more information about aromatherapy on pages 50 to 51.

Safety

You should only have a massage from a therapist who is trained and qualified to treat people with cancer. They should have some knowledge of cancer and its treatments. It is important to tell your therapist about the cancer and the treatment you are having. You can contact the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) to find a qualified massage therapist (page 96). You will need to check that they are trained and experienced in working with people who have cancer.

During your therapy, it is important to avoid massage to certain areas. This includes:

- areas that are directly over a tumour
- any lymph nodes (glands) affected by cancer
- open wounds, or areas that are bruised or sensitive
- areas being treated with radiotherapy, during treatment and for a few weeks after it finishes
- the area around intravenous catheters (such as central lines) and pain relief patches
- areas affected by blood clots, poor circulation or varicose veins.

It is also important to be particularly gentle if:

- the cancer has spread to your bones
- you have a low platelet count – platelets are cells that help the blood to clot.

If you bleed or bruise easily, or if you have cancer in your bones, speak to your cancer doctor or specialist nurse before having massage therapy. You will need to discuss this with your massage therapist before having a massage.

Manual lymphatic drainage (MLD)

This is a specialised type of massage that may be used to treat lymphoedema. Lymphoedema is swelling that develops because of a build-up of lymph fluid in the body's tissues. The lymphatic system usually drains the fluid away. Lymphoedema happens when the lymphatic system is not working properly. MLD can improve circulation in the lymphatic system. If your healthcare team feel you would benefit from MLD, they will refer you to you a lymphoedema specialist or physiotherapist trained in this.

We have more information about lymphoedema and MLD in our booklet **Understanding lymphoedema**.

You can order our booklets and leaflets for free.
Visit **orders.macmillan.org.uk** or call **0808 808 00 00**.



Other touch therapies

There are many different types of touch therapy. In this information we explain the following therapies:

- shiatsu (pages 42 to 43)
- acupressure (page 43)
- reflexology (page 44)
- therapeutic touch (pages 44 to 45).

Many of these therapies are based on the idea that everyone has a special type of energy that can be used to benefit health. This energy is sometimes called chi or qi.

There is no evidence that this type of energy exists, or that it can have any effect on cancer. But some people find these therapies relaxing and calming.

The therapies vary in how much physical contact they use. They may be available in some cancer support centres or hospitals. Wherever you have treatment, it is important to check that the therapist or practitioner is trained, registered and insured. You should also make sure they have experience in working with people who have cancer.

Shiatsu

Shiatsu is a type of Japanese massage. Shiatsu therapists believe that health depends on the balanced flow of energy (qi) through certain channels in the body.

Shiatsu involves a therapist applying pressure to areas of the body using their fingers and the palm of the hand. The therapist may also gently stretch or hold areas of the body to reduce stiffness and soreness. The theory is that applying pressure with a finger or hand can re-energise weak areas and reduce tension in the body. Shiatsu therapy is applied through clothing.

Shiatsu may be available at a cancer support centre (page 91) or hospital.

In a study of people with cancer who had shiatsu in an NHS hospital, people said they felt less anxious and less stressed after it. It also helped with pain management and well-being.

Acupressure

Acupressure is a kind of massage, based on acupuncture (pages 46 to 47). It involves putting pressure on certain points on the body, called acupoints. The therapist can teach you how to do this yourself, so you can continue the treatment at home.

Acupressure may be used to help manage:

- nausea and vomiting from chemotherapy
- pain and headaches
- stress and anxiety.

But there is little evidence that acupressure helps with these symptoms.

One type of acupressure applies pressure on a point on the inner wrist. The point is called P6. Pressure can be applied with fingers or wristbands. Some studies suggest that this may help reduce nausea after surgery.

Some studies have found that acupressure may also reduce fatigue.

Reflexology

Reflexology is based on the belief that applying gentle pressure to certain points in the feet stimulates nerve and energy pathways in other areas of the body. There is no evidence that this is the case. But many people say they feel more relaxed after reflexology, and use it to help reduce stress and anxiety.

Reflexology is seen as a safe therapy. The reflexologist applies gentle pressure to specific points on the feet, or sometimes the hands.

Reflexology cannot be used for diagnosis or treatment of cancer. Some studies have shown that reflexology may help with some symptoms such as anxiety and pain, but more research is needed. There is some evidence that reflexology may help with chemotherapy-related peripheral neuropathy. This is nerve damage caused by some chemotherapy drugs.

Your therapist will ask you a few questions before any treatment to make sure it is a safe treatment for you.

Therapeutic touch

In therapeutic touch, the therapist places their hands just above or sometimes on the person. They believe this affects an energy field surrounding each person, and that therapeutic touch can help restore and balance the energy. But there is no evidence that this energy field exists. Therapeutic touch is sometimes called healing touch or spiritual healing.

There have been studies looking at the benefits of therapeutic touch. But the quality of evidence is low. Some people feel that therapeutic touch gives them valuable support and helps with relaxation and well-being.

Reiki

Reiki is a type of therapeutic touch that was developed in Japan. The person having reiki sits or lies down, and the therapist gently places their hands on or just above their body. The therapist moves their hands in a series of positions that cover most of the body. The person having reiki does not need to remove any clothing.

Some people who have reiki say that it can help them feel more relaxed. Practitioners believe it may help relieve stress and help with well-being.

Reiki therapists believe that people can have reiki from a distance. Reiki is thought to be safe to have. You can learn more from the UK Reiki Federation. Visit reikifed.co.uk

“ I was very sceptical that it would work, but I found reiki very relaxing. ”

Michael, diagnosed with leukaemia

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is the practice of inserting very fine needles into the body at particular points called acupoints. These are then left for a while before being removed.

Acupuncture is thought to have been used in China for about 2,000 years. The traditional thinking is that everyone has a special type of energy (chi or qi) that flows through pathways in the body. These pathways are called meridians or channels. Traditional acupuncturists believe that inserting needles at specific points along these pathways rebalances this flow of energy and improves health and wellness.

It is now used widely as Western medical acupuncture. This approach believes that inserting needles through the skin and into muscle stimulates nerves. This results in the release of chemicals such as endorphins. These act as natural painkillers and give a feeling of well-being.

Acupuncture can be used to help manage some symptoms and side effects of cancer treatments. It is available in many NHS hospitals, pain clinics and hospices. Some cancer doctors or nurses are trained in acupuncture.

Acupuncture may be used to help with different symptoms. Studies have shown that acupuncture may help to:

- reduce nausea in people who have had chemotherapy
- improve sleep
- relieve pain
- relieve hot flushes.

Your cancer doctor or acupuncturist can talk to you about what research has been done and whether acupuncture may help in your situation.

You can read more about acupuncture and find an acupuncturist on these websites:

- British Acupuncture Council (BAcC) – **acupuncture.org.uk**
- British Medical Acupuncture Society (BMAS) – **medical-acupuncture.co.uk**

Safety

Acupuncture is generally thought to be a safe treatment when it is performed by a qualified professional. Side effects are very rare. But they can be serious if the needles are used incorrectly or inserted too deep.

It is important to check the acupuncturist has experience in treating people with cancer.

If you are having treatment that could affect your blood count, you should check with your doctor before having acupuncture. Some cancer treatments such as chemotherapy can reduce the number of white blood cells in your blood. This can increase your risk of infection. We have more information at **macmillan.org.uk/infection**

You should also avoid acupuncture if you have a very low number of platelets (blood cells that help blood to clot) or you bruise easily. These can increase your risk of bleeding.

If you have had lymph nodes removed as part of cancer treatment, this can cause swelling in the area close by. For example, you might have swelling in your arm after breast cancer surgery. This is called lymphoedema. If you have, or are at risk of, lymphoedema, avoid acupuncture in that part of your body.

Homeopathy

Homeopathy is based on the idea that 'like cures like'. A person who uses homeopathy to treat people is called a homeopath. Homeopaths work with substances that would cause symptoms if given in a large amount to a healthy person. They believe that giving a tiny amount of this substance to a person who has the symptom will start a healing response. There is no scientific basis for this idea.

Homeopathic remedies are mostly made of plant and mineral extracts. They come as tablets, liquids or creams. The remedies are usually very diluted, so they contain little, if any, of the original plant or mineral extract.

Homeopaths believe homeopathic remedies can help a number of different medical conditions. But they are not a substitute for conventional cancer treatments.

Research has not shown homeopathy to be an effective treatment. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) is an independent body that advises the UK government. It advised that homeopathy should not be available through the NHS. Homeopathy is not funded by the NHS in England, Wales or Northern Ireland. But some health boards in Scotland do provide homeopathy. If you live in Scotland and are interested in this type of therapy, talk to your GP or cancer doctor.

In general, homeopathy products are safe to use alongside conventional cancer treatments (pages 6 to 7). Homeopathy should never be used instead of conventional cancer treatments. You should tell your cancer doctor before you start any homeopathy. It is also important to tell a homeopath that you are having cancer treatment.

Herb and plant extracts

There are different types of therapies that use herb and plant extracts. We have information about:

- aromatherapy (pages 50 to 51)
- flower remedies (page 52)
- herbal medicines (pages 53 to 56)
- mistletoe (pages 57 to 58).

You can buy some of these therapies in shops, on the internet, or from nutritionists and herbalists. They are usually taken by mouth, but may also be oils and creams you apply to the skin.

There is no medical evidence that flower, plant, or herbal medicines have any effect on cancer. But some people may find using these therapies helps with some symptoms or side effects.

If you are thinking about taking a herbal therapy or already take a herbal treatment, it is important to talk to your cancer doctor, specialist nurse or pharmacist. Herbal remedies are not recommended during cancer drug treatment. It is important to follow your doctor's advice.

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy is the use of concentrated natural oils extracted from plants. They are called essential oils. People believe that using these oils can help you feel better and improve your well-being.

Aromatherapy may be used with other complementary therapies such as massage. The oils may also be used:

- in baths
- as creams
- through diffusers
- in nasal inhalers (aroma sticks).

An aromatherapist will choose the oils they think will benefit you the most. For example, if you are having difficulty sleeping, they may choose an oil that is thought to help with relaxation and sleep.

Studies into the use of aromatherapy have shown varying results. Some studies have suggested that people using aromatherapy were less anxious, or had improved sleep and well-being.

You can buy essential oils in shops and online. But it is important to ask a qualified aromatherapist for advice before using essential oils at home. Some essential oils may interact with other medicines. It is important to talk to your cancer doctor if you wish to try aromatherapy. You also need to tell an aromatherapist about any treatment you are having or have recently had.

Aromatherapy oils need to be used with care as they are very concentrated and may cause harm if used incorrectly. They should only be used externally and be well diluted.

The International Federation of Aromatherapists has more information on its website, and a register of qualified aromatherapists (page 96). You can search this to find one in your area. The Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) also has a register of qualified aromatherapists – page 96.



Flower remedies

Flower remedies are a type of essence therapy. Essence therapies use liquids that are thought to capture the healing properties of flowers, plants or other naturally occurring things.

The most well-known essence remedies are flower remedies. They are prepared by placing flower heads into spring water under direct sunlight, or heating the plant in spring water. The plant material is removed. The water is then diluted with more water, or with alcohol (usually brandy). You take the remedy as a liquid.

Flower remedy practitioners believe they can help treat different emotional states. Some believe they can boost your immune system, but there is no evidence to support this.

Flower remedies do not treat cancer. They are available in shops and online.

Flower remedies are considered safe. Some people feel they help reduce anxiety and help them feel better.

Flower remedies are often diluted in alcohol, so if you do not drink alcohol you may choose not to use them.

Herbal medicines

Herbal medicines use plants or plant extracts to treat illnesses and promote health. Herbs may be used as part of traditional Chinese medicine. There are many different herbs that are used as herbal medicines.

Herbs can be:

- boiled in water and drunk as a tea
- mixed in an alcohol solution
- made into tablets, creams or ointments.

Examples of commonly used herbs include the following:

- Ginger – this can be used to relieve feelings of sickness (nausea).
- St John's wort – this can be used to treat a low mood and mild to moderate depression. It can interact with many prescription medicines. Always check with your cancer doctor or pharmacist before using it.

Taking herbs during cancer treatment

Some herbal therapies can interact with cancer treatments. For example, some can make cancer treatments less effective or increase their side effects. Examples include the following:

- St John's wort affects many prescribed medicines. It can reduce the effectiveness of the chemotherapy drugs irinotecan and docetaxel.
- Green tea supplements may make the targeted therapy drug bortezomib (Velcade®) less effective. They can also increase the side effects of the chemotherapy drug irinotecan and the hormonal therapy tamoxifen.
- Garlic supplements and evening primrose oil may affect blood clotting. You should not use them before having surgery, as they may increase the risk of bleeding.

A herbal medicine may contain many substances. You may not know what all the active ingredients are. This means it is not possible to know all the possible effects the herbal medicine could have on other medicines or treatments.

Doctors usually advise that you avoid herbal medicines for a few weeks before, during and after cancer treatment.

We have more information about cancer treatment on our website. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/treatments-and-drugs](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/treatments-and-drugs)



Safety

If you take herbal medicines or are interested in taking them, it is important to talk to your cancer doctor or pharmacist. They need to know all the medicines you are taking and whether they are prescribed.

People may feel that taking herbal medicine will be safe as herbs are natural products. But this does not mean they are always safe. Natural substances can have strong side effects. Many medicines, including some chemotherapy drugs, are made from plants.

Something that might be safe in lower doses can be harmful in higher doses. For example, drinking green tea is generally safe, but green tea supplements can contain much higher doses of certain substances. As well as interacting with some cancer drugs, green tea supplements can sometimes cause serious liver problems.

It is important to be aware of any side effects that herbal medicines may cause. And remember that some herbal medicines could interact with any medicines you take.

Traditional herbal registration

If you choose to take herbal medicines, it is best to buy only products that have the traditional herbal registration (THR) certification mark. This is a quality mark that shows the products have been tested for quality and safety. Herbal products that you buy in health food shops and pharmacies must meet quality standards.

Herbal products that are sold online or made for personal use do not have the THR mark. There are no checks on how these products are made or guarantees of what they contain and in what dose.

If you are visiting a herbalist, check that they are registered with an accredited body.

If you want to learn more about herbs, the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre provides information about individual herbs, their uses and possible side effects (page 97).

Mistletoe (Iscador[®], Eurixor[®])

It is important to check with your cancer doctor if you are thinking about using mistletoe.

Mistletoe can be taken by mouth or as injections. It is sometimes described as herbal medicine.

Studies suggest that mistletoe may:

- improve your quality of life
- reduce the side effects of chemotherapy, radiotherapy and some targeted therapies.

Some research studies have looked at whether mistletoe is linked to longer survival after a cancer diagnosis. The results are not clear because the studies are often poor quality. For example, the studies only involved small numbers of people, and usually only included people who were also having conventional cancer treatment.

There is currently no reliable evidence to show that mistletoe will treat cancer. It is not advisable to use mistletoe as an alternative to cancer treatments.

Safety

It is important to check with your cancer doctor if you are thinking about using mistletoe.

Mistletoe may affect the immune system. This means it could make some medicines less effective. This includes immunosuppressants, which people take after a donor stem cell or bone marrow transplant. We have more information about these treatments on our website. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/stem-cell](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/stem-cell)

Large doses of mistletoe may cause more serious side effects. When given as an injection under the skin, mistletoe may cause mild swelling, itching and pain around the injection site. Rarely, it can cause allergic reactions. These can be serious in some people.

Diet and food supplements

After a cancer diagnosis, many people think about making changes to their diet to help them stay as healthy as possible. Eating a healthy balanced diet is the best way to do this. We have more information in our booklet **Healthy eating and cancer** (page 88) and on our website. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/eating-well-keeping-active](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/eating-well-keeping-active)

Some people believe that specific diets can treat or cure cancer (pages 82 to 83). But there is no diet or food supplement that can be used instead of conventional cancer treatment.

Some people may need to change their diet due to cancer symptoms or treatment side effects. For example, some people may need to:

- have less fibre following surgery
- eat more calories if they have lost weight
- change their diet if they have unwanted side effects affecting their digestive system.

There is no specific diet that everyone with cancer should follow. Your healthcare team will be able to advise you if you should follow a certain diet. Most people can follow a healthy balanced diet. This will give them all the nutrients they need.



Your healthcare team might refer you to a dietitian for advice.

This may happen if you:

- are underweight
- find it difficult to maintain a healthy weight
- have problems with symptoms and side effects when you eat or drink.

We have more information about a building-up diet and how to help with eating problems in our booklets **The building-up diet** and **Eating problems and cancer**.

Dietary supplements

If you cannot get all the nutrients you need through your diet, you may need supplements. These are available as:

- milkshakes
- yoghurts
- juices
- powders
- soups.

Your cancer doctor or a dietitian may prescribe these if you need extra carbohydrates, protein or fat. The supplements sometimes have extra vitamins and minerals added to them. These supplements are sometimes called oral nutritional supplements or sip-feeds.

You can order our booklets and leaflets for free.

Visit orders.macmillan.org.uk or call **0808 808 00 00**.



Vitamin and mineral supplements

Vitamins and minerals are substances we all need in small amounts to help our bodies work properly.

Antioxidants help protect your cells from damage. They are made in the body and are found in many foods, especially vegetables and fruit.

Antioxidants include:

- vitamins A, C and E
- coenzyme Q10
- selenium
- some plant extracts.

You may be at risk of not getting enough vitamins and minerals if you:

- are not eating well and have not eaten well for a long time
- have had surgery to your digestive system.

Your cancer doctor or a dietitian may prescribe vitamins and minerals if you need them. This will make sure you get the full amount of the nutrients you need.

Do you need supplements?

Some people think that if something is good for you in small amounts, it will be even better in larger amounts. But this is not always true. Nutrients are essential for our health in small amounts. But they may be harmful and cause unpleasant side effects when taken in large amounts. Some may affect cancer treatments or make them less effective.

Safety

If you are thinking of taking any food supplements, it is important to talk to your cancer doctor, specialist nurse, pharmacist or dietitian first.

There is no evidence to suggest that taking supplements can prevent cancer, help treat cancer or stop it from coming back. Research has found that taking some supplements may make some cancer treatments less effective. Also, some supplements may increase the risk of some cancers developing.

There is some evidence that taking high-dose antioxidant supplements during cancer treatment may make cancer treatment less effective. Until more evidence is available, your cancer doctor may recommend that you do not take antioxidant supplements during your treatment, unless it is as part of a clinical trial.

You do not need to limit antioxidants that are found naturally in food.

Probiotics

If you are taking or thinking of taking probiotics, it is important to talk to your cancer doctor, specialist nurse, pharmacist or dietitian first.

Probiotic supplements contain live bacteria and yeasts that are promoted as having various health benefits. They are often said to contain 'good bacteria'. They are usually added to yoghurts or taken as food supplements.

Some research suggests that certain probiotics are useful in treating side effects caused by some cancer treatments.

Safety

There is a small risk that probiotics could cause an infection from the yeast or bacteria in the product. This is because some cancer treatments can lower the number of white blood cells in the body, which fight infection. Because of this risk, it is important to talk to your cancer doctor before taking any probiotics or live yoghurts.

If you would like to discuss dietary supplements and get more information, call the Macmillan Support Line on **0808 808 00 00**.

Choosing a nutrition professional

Choosing a nutrition professional can be difficult. Many people claim to be experts in nutrition but have only limited knowledge or training. Unless they are on a professional register, there is no way to know what standards they follow. If you are choosing a therapist for nutrition information or advice, the following information may help.

Registered dietitians

A registered dietitian (RD) is the only qualified healthcare professional who can assess, diagnose and treat dietary and nutritional problems. They work with both healthy and sick people in:

- hospital
- other healthcare settings
- the community.

Dietitians use current medical evidence to give specific advice to people with eating or weight problems. They also give advice on healthy eating in general. Some dietitians specialise in helping people affected by cancer. Dietitians are regulated by law and must meet a national standard of practice from the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) – page 96.

Nutritionists

Nutritionists use their knowledge of the science of food to help people make the right choices about what they eat. They cannot join the HCPC. But they can volunteer to register with the Association for Nutrition (AfN) if they meet the AfN requirements – page 94. This organisation is recognised by the NHS. Some dietitians may also call themselves nutritionists, as people understand this job title better.

Nutritional therapists

Nutritional therapists are recognised by the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) as complementary therapists – page 96. They work with people to identify and address any nutritional imbalances in the body. They are not regulated by law and cannot join the HCPC. Some nutritional therapists may try to help you improve your health using methods such as detoxing, or suggesting you take high-dose vitamins. These types of diet are not recommended for people with cancer.

Talking, counselling and support groups

Talking, counselling and support groups are not complementary therapies. But we have included them because many people find them helpful during and after treatment.

Talking about your thoughts and feelings may help you cope with the stress, anxiety and difficult feelings that can happen following a cancer diagnosis. You may find that it helps to talk openly with your family and friends. The healthcare professionals caring for you and who know your situation can also be a good source of support. They will be able to tell you about other sources of support at the hospital, such as a psychologist or counselling service.

There is more information in our booklet **Talking about cancer** (page 88). Your family, friends and carers may find our booklet **Talking with someone who has cancer** helpful (page 88).

Counselling

Many people get the support they need by talking to close family members or friends. It can sometimes be helpful to talk to someone from outside the situation, who has been trained to listen. Counsellors and psychologists can help you explore confusing or upsetting emotions and help you find ways of coping with difficult feelings.

Some GPs have counsellors within their practice, or can refer you to a counsellor. Our cancer support specialists on **0808 808 00 00** can give you details of how to find counsellors in your local area.



“ I have made friends with a group of women who started chemo at the same time as me. We are all still in touch and continue to support each other on a daily basis. ”

Diana, diagnosed with breast cancer

Self-help and support groups

Many people find it helpful to join a self-help or support group. It can help you feel less alone. You can also learn from the experiences of other people and how they have coped with the cancer and its effects on their lives.

Some groups are for people with a specific type of cancer. For example, there are breast cancer groups and laryngectomy groups. It may help to go along to see what the group is like before you decide to join. You might want to take someone with you.

Each cancer support group is different. Most groups provide training in listening skills for group leaders. This means they will be able to listen in a positive, caring way. Meetings might include an activity, a social event or a talk from a guest speaker.

You may be able to access support services through the group. These might include complementary therapies or counselling.

You can search for groups in your area by visiting **macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups** or by asking someone from your healthcare team. You can also call our cancer support specialists on **0808 808 00 00**.

Share your experience

Having cancer is a life-changing experience. When treatment finishes, many people find it helps to talk about it and share their thoughts, feelings and advice with other people. Hearing about how you have coped, what side effects you had, and how you managed them, may help someone in a similar situation.

Find out more about Macmillan Cancer Voices. Call **0300 1000 200** or visit **macmillan.org.uk/cancer-voices**



Alternative therapies

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What are alternative therapies?

Alternative therapies are treatments used instead of conventional cancer treatments (pages 6 to 7). They may claim to treat or even cure cancer. But there is no scientific proof to support these claims. Alternative therapies are also known as alternative medicine.

Why do people use alternative therapies?

Many people with an early-stage cancer can be cured by conventional cancer treatments.

But some people might choose an alternative therapy because they:

- feel that cancer treatments cannot help them
- feel that cancer treatments could be harmful
- are concerned about the side effects of conventional cancer treatments.

When you read or hear about alternative therapies, they can sound very effective. And for people who have a cancer that cannot be cured, or who have been told there is no further treatment available, looking for an alternative treatment may seem a good option.

But if a cancer cannot be cured by conventional cancer treatment, it will not be cured with an alternative therapy. Also, some alternative therapies:

- can cause harm
- may interact with other medicines, which can also be harmful
- are expensive and can lead to people having large bills or a lot of debt.

Remember that even when a cancer is advanced, cancer treatments can help control it and help people live longer.

Research and alternative therapies

Claims about alternative therapies and their effect on cancer may be based on tests that have been done on cancer cells in a laboratory. But to know if a treatment is really effective, it needs to be used in people. This is why clinical trials are so important. We have more information about clinical trials on our website. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/clinical-trials](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/clinical-trials)

It is also why it can take so long to develop new cancer treatments. Claims that an alternative therapy has a positive effect on treating cancer cells in a laboratory do not mean it will have any effect on someone with cancer.

It can be difficult to find evidence about alternative therapies. Often the claims are based on 1 person's story about how a particular treatment has helped them. But 1 person's experience is not scientific evidence. And it can be difficult to check that the person's story is reliable, or what happened to them after they published their story.

False claims about alternative therapies have sometimes led people to refuse cancer treatments that could have helped them. For some people this can affect how long they live, or their quality of life.

Get advice and support first

If you are thinking about using an alternative therapy, talk to your cancer doctor or specialist nurse first. They can give you advice and support as you decide what to do. They can talk to you about issues you need to think about.

If you are unsure about the conventional cancer treatments you are offered, you may want to get a second medical opinion. This means asking a different doctor if they agree with your diagnosis or treatment. If the second doctor gives you the same advice, this can reassure you. They may also give you other treatment options to think about. You might want to ask if there are any clinical trials that might be suitable for you.

We have more information about getting a second opinion on our website. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/second-opinion](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/second-opinion)

If you are thinking of using an alternative therapy, it is important to check it is as safe as possible. Find out as much as you can about the therapist and the therapy before you start any treatment.

Alternative therapies can be expensive, and some can cause serious side effects. Your healthcare team may advise you against using alternative therapies.

Types of alternative therapy

There are many types of alternative therapy. In this information we explain some of the alternative therapies that are well-known to people with cancer. These include:

- amygdalin (laetrile, vitamin B17) – page 76
- cannabis oil or CBD oil (pages 77 to 79)
- metabolic therapy (pages 80 to 81)
- diets that claim to treat cancer (pages 82 to 83)
- megavitamin therapy (page 84)
- Essiac® and Flor-essence® (pages 84 to 85)
- black salve (Cansema®) – page 85.

If you would like to talk to someone about alternative therapies, you can call the Macmillan Support Line on **0808 808 00 00**.

Amygdalin (laetrile, vitamin B17)

Amygdalin is a chemical compound found in some plants, bitter almonds, peach stones and apricot stones.

Laetrile is a purified, man-made form of amygdalin. Some suppliers call it vitamin B17, but it is not actually a vitamin.

Some people believe that laetrile can slow or stop the growth of cancer. They claim it can poison cancer cells, without damaging normal cells and tissues. But there is no medical evidence to support this. A review of studies that looked at the outcomes for people with cancer taking laetrile found no evidence that it can control or cure cancer.

Safety

Laetrile can have serious side effects. When amygdalin is processed by the body, it changes into cyanide, which is a poison.

There is a risk of cyanide poisoning from taking amygdalin or laetrile. Some people have died from cyanide poisoning as a result of taking laetrile.

The sale of laetrile is banned in the UK and Europe. It is also banned by the Food and Drugs Administration (FDA) in the USA. Unlike conventional medicines, the manufacture of laetrile is not controlled. This means that if you buy laetrile, you will not know what it contains or if it is contaminated with other substances.

If you are thinking about taking laetrile, it is important to talk to your cancer doctor.

Cannabis oil and CBD oil

Cannabis is a plant. It produces a resin that contains different substances. Some of these may have medicinal value. These substances are called cannabinoids.

2 of the main cannabinoids tested in medicines are:

- THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol)
- CBD (cannabidiol).

THC is a psychoactive substance. This means it can affect your mood and how you feel so that you feel 'high' or 'stoned'. CBD does not cause these effects.

Cannabis is classified as a class B drug in the UK. This means it is illegal to have it or sell it. The laws about cannabis mean that:

- THC and products that contain THC are illegal in the UK
- selling or possessing CBD is legal.

Cannabis and medicines

There are some medicines available in the UK that come from cannabis. These include:

- Sativex®, which is used to treat multiple sclerosis
- Nabilone®, which is used to relieve sickness caused by chemotherapy.

These medicines go through a process to make sure they are safe to be licensed in the UK. Cannabis-based products for medicinal use are also called medical cannabis. Medical cannabis was legalised in the UK in November 2018. This means these specific medicines can be prescribed by specialist doctors for certain medical conditions.

Cannabis and cancer

Scientists have researched THC and CBD to find out if they can be used in the treatment of cancer. Most of this research has been done in the laboratory. There have been some small studies in people.

So far, different cannabinoids seem to have different effects on different types of cancer. At the moment, there is no reliable medical evidence to show whether cannabis, in any form, can effectively and safely treat cancer in humans.

Cannabis oil

Cannabis oil is available online. There are different types. Cannabis oil can contain different amounts of THC and CBD.

CBD oil

CBD oil is also sold in some shops, such as health food shops. It can be sold in the UK as a food supplement, if the seller does not make any claims about its medicinal properties.

CBD oil in its pure form does not contain THC. This means it does not have any psychoactive effects (it does not make you feel stoned). CBD oil is not a controlled substance under the Misuse of Drugs Act. The Food Standards Agency advises that healthy adults consume no more than 10mg each day.

If you are thinking about using cannabis oil or CBD oil, there are some important things to consider:

- THC and products that contain THC are illegal in the UK.
- THC in cannabis oil can cause side effects, such as an increased heart rate, dizziness, hallucinations, paranoia and feeling stoned.
- CBD and THC can affect how some medicines work. Tell your doctor if you are taking CBD oil while taking any other medicine.

We have more information about cannabis oil and cancer on our website. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/cannabis-oil](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cannabis-oil)

Metabolic therapy

People who promote metabolic therapy believe that cancer is caused by a build-up of toxic substances in the body. They claim that metabolic therapy can treat cancer by removing toxins and strengthening the immune system to allow the body to heal naturally. There is no scientific evidence to show that these claims are true.

Metabolic treatments usually include following a strict diet and treatments to clear the bowel. They can vary from one therapist to another. One of the most well-known therapies is called the Gerson therapy or Gerson diet. This may include:

- a diet of fresh raw fruit and vegetables, taken as an hourly glass of freshly prepared juice
- a diet with no fat or salt (sodium)
- a diet with low animal protein
- vitamin, mineral and other chemical supplements
- regular coffee enemas.

These are said to flush toxins out of the body. But there is no medical evidence to show that they help treat cancer.

Studies have looked at the Gerson therapy and the claims it makes. None have shown that Gerson therapy has successfully treated cancer. It is difficult to know much about the health of people who have used the Gerson therapy, as record-keeping is poor.

If you are thinking of using a metabolic therapy, get advice from your cancer doctor, specialist nurse or dietitian.

Safety

Possible side effects of metabolic or Gerson therapy include:

- nausea (feeling sick)
- vomiting (being sick)
- stomach cramps
- a high temperature
- aches and pains.

The limited diet can cause nutrient deficiencies including protein and vitamin D. The risks of using coffee enemas include infections and serious damage to the large bowel.

Diets that claim to treat cancer

There are other diets that claim to treat cancer. This includes alkaline diets, ketogenic diets and macrobiotic diets.

An alkaline diet is based on the belief that an acidic environment promotes ill-health, and that certain foods cause this. But research has not shown that diet can change the acidity of the human body.

A ketogenic diet is low in carbohydrates and high in fat. If there are no carbohydrates to change into glucose for energy, the body will change fat into ketones for energy. The belief is that cancer cells do not use ketones for energy and so will not grow. This diet contains very little fibre, fruit and vegetables. It can cause low levels of some vitamins and minerals, and also cause constipation, diarrhoea and tiredness. A ketogenic diet has shown some benefit for some medical conditions, but there is no evidence that it is helpful for people with cancer.

A macrobiotic diet aims to include foods that do not contain toxins. The diets can vary but in general the foods eaten include whole grains, organic fruit and vegetables, and legumes such as beans, lentils and chickpeas. While this is a healthy diet in many ways, it may lack some vitamins and minerals if followed strictly. There is no evidence that this diet has an anti-cancer effect.

There are other diets that people suggest will help treat cancer. And some people believe that certain food substances, such as dairy products, should be cut out of the diet to help treat cancer.

It is understandable that some people wish to try a diet that seems to offer hope. But there is no medical evidence to show that these diets, or any other diet, can cure cancer. There is also no evidence to show that they can help people with advanced cancer live longer.

Some diets are high in fibre and low in calories and protein. These are not suitable if you have problems maintaining your weight. If you are underweight, you need protein and calories from any source of food. Before cutting out any food group from your diet, it is best to talk to your cancer doctor, specialist nurse or dietitian.

Safety

If you choose to follow a diet that cuts out some food types, it is important to make sure you are not missing out on important nutrients. For example, if you follow a dairy-free diet it is important to replace the calcium that you would usually get from dairy products.

The British Dietetic Association (BDA) has more information about alternative diets and cancer – page 95. You can read more at bda.uk.com/resource/cancer-diets-myths-and-more.html

Megavitamin therapy

This therapy involves taking very large doses of vitamins as a way of preventing and treating cancer. There is currently no evidence that taking large doses of vitamins is helpful in treating cancer. Some vitamins can be harmful in high doses.

Safety

High-dose vitamin C is one of the most common types of megavitamin therapy. Studies looking at the role of vitamin C and cancer have had varying results. Some studies have suggested that very high doses of vitamin C given into the bloodstream (intravenously) may have a beneficial effect for some people with cancer. But studies also suggest that vitamin C may make some chemotherapy drugs less effective. More research needs to be done.

It is important to tell your cancer doctor if you are thinking of having high-dose vitamin C.

High-dose vitamin C is not suitable for people who have:

- kidney problems
- a condition that causes iron overload (haemochromatosis)
- a G6PDH deficiency.

Essiac® and Flor-essence®

Essiac® is a combination of 4 herbs. Flor-essence® is a similar product but contains additional herbs. Essiac® is available as a powder or liquid to make into a herbal tea, as capsules and drops. Essiac® and Flor-essence® are sold as nutritional supplements.

Some people believe that Essiac® or Flor-essence® may treat cancer, strengthen the immune system and help you feel better. But there is no medical evidence to show that taking these products helps treat cancer or improves quality of life.

There has been research into Essiac® and its effect on cancer cells in the laboratory. Studies of the different herbs have shown that some may have an antioxidant or anti-tumour effect. But other studies have shown that Essiac® can cause cancer cells to grow in the laboratory.

Safety

It is important not to take Essiac® during cancer treatment, or with any other medicines, without checking with your cancer doctor first.

Black salve (Cansema®, bloodroot)

Black salve is also called Cansema® or bloodroot. It is a herbal paste that acts as an escharotic. This means that it causes the skin to burn and scab.

Some people and websites promote black salve as a treatment for skin cancer, or for tumours that are close to the surface of the skin. They claim that the paste 'draws' the cancer out, encasing it in a scab which then falls off the body. There is no medical evidence to support this.

Safety

Black salve can have serious side effects. When the scab falls off, there can be permanent damage to the skin and tissue beneath. Some people using it have been permanently disfigured. It can also leave behind an open wound that is prone to infection.

If you are thinking of using black salve, it is important to talk to your cancer doctor.



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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 want our information to be as clear as possible. To do this, we try to:

- use plain English
- explain medical words
- use short sentences
- use illustrations to explain text
- structure the information clearly
- make sure important points are clear.

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.

To find out more about how we produce our information, visit **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](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)**

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.

Complementary therapy organisations

Association for Nutrition (AfN)

Tel: **0208 149 7780**

www.associationfornutrition.org

Promotes and maintains high standards of practice among nutritionists. Has a register of nutritionists that meet AfN's requirement for evidence-based nutrition and is recognised by Public Health England and the NHS.

Association of Reflexologists

Tel: **0182 335 1010**

www.aor.org.uk

Provides information about reflexology and a search for reflexologists in your area.

British Acupuncture Council (BAcC)

Tel **0208 735 0400**

www.acupuncture.org.uk

Professional body for traditional acupuncturists approved by the Professional Standards Authority. Maintains professional standards of practice for acupuncture in the UK. You can search for a BAcC member in your area via the website.

British Association for Art Therapists (BAAT)

Tel **0207 686 4216**

www.baat.org

Has a register of Health and Care Professionals council (HCPC) registered art therapists who work in independent private practice. Promotes art therapy and provides professional support and advice to its members.

British Association for Music Therapy (BAMT)

Tel **0207 837 6100**

www.bamt.org

Professional body for Music Therapy in the UK, promoting and raising awareness of Music Therapy, and providing information to the general public.

British Association of Mindfulness-based Approaches

www.bamba.org.uk

A professional body of mindfulness practitioners and teachers. Its mission is to promote safe, ethical and inclusive practices in the field of evidence-based secular mindfulness teaching in the UK. Has a register of mindfulness teachers in the UK.

British Dietetic Association (BDA)

Tel **0121 200 8080**

www.bda.uk.com

Professional body for dietitians and anybody working in nutrition. The website provides a large amount of information on food and nutrition.

British Medical Acupuncture Society (BMAS)

Tel: **0160 678 6782**

www.medical-acupuncture.co.uk

Promotes acupuncture within medicine for the public benefit and high standards of working practices in acupuncture. Has a search facility on the website so you can find a BMAS member practising medical acupuncture.

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC)

Tel **0203 327 2720**

www.cnhc.org.uk

The UK register for complementary healthcare practitioners. Its key purpose is to protect the public. You can search the UK register for practitioners of 18 different complementary therapies that have met UK standards.

Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC)

Tel: **0300 500 6184**

www.hcpc-uk.org

UK-wide body that ensures health and care professionals have the knowledge and skills to practise safely and effectively. Has a register of professionals who are allowed to practise because they meet the professional, health, behaviour and training standards required of them.

International Federation of Aromatherapists (IFA)

Tel: **0208 567 2243**

www.ifaroma.org

A professional body for aromatherapists. Has a register of qualified and regulated aromatherapists. All listed practitioners abide by the IFA Professional Codes of Practice, Ethics and Conduct and have registered voluntarily.

Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre

www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/diagnosis-treatment/symptom-management/integrative-medicine/herbs

The herb database provides objective evidence-based information about different herbs and complementary therapies.

National Council for Hypnotherapy

Tel: **0800 980 4419**

www.hypnotherapists.org.uk

Has a register of hypnotherapists. Encourages high training standards and for members to maintain these. Has a Code of Conduct and wants to ensure the public receive high quality of treatment.

National Hypnotherapy Society

Tel: **0190 323 6857**

www.nationalhypnotherapysociety.org

Has information about hypnotherapy and the conditions it might help. Has an accredited register of hypnotherapists.

National Institute of Medical Herbalists

Tel: **0139 242 6022**

www.nimh.org.uk

Provides information about herbal medicine and has a register of herbalists in the UK

Professional Standards Authority

Tel: **0207 389 8030**

www.professionalstandards.org.uk

Reviews the work of the regulators of health and care professionals, and accredits organisations that register practitioners in unregulated occupations. You can find accredited registers on the website.

Shiatsu Society

Tel: **0204 551 2147**

www.shiatsusociety.org

The UK's leading professional association for shiatsu practitioners. Has information on the benefits of shiatsu and how to contact a registered practitioner.

Sophrology Academy

Tel **0786 142 0059**

www.sophroacademy.co.uk

Has information about sophrology and a directory of sophrologists.

UK Reiki Federation

Tel: **0203 745 9746**

www.reikifed.co.uk

An independent organisation for people who practice reiki and the public.

NHS well-being resources

England

www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters

Scotland

www.nhsinform.scot/mind-to-mind

Wales

www.111.wales.nhs.uk/encyclopaedia/m/article/mentalhealthandwellbeing

Northern Ireland

www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/healthy-lives/mental-health

General cancer support organisations

Cancer Black Care

Tel **0734 047 1970**

www.cancerblackcare.org.uk

Provides support for all those living with and affected by cancer, with an emphasis on Black people and people of colour.

Cancer Focus Northern Ireland

Helpline **0800 783 3339**

www.cancerfocusni.org

Offers a variety of services to people affected by cancer in Northern Ireland.

Macmillan Cancer Voices

www.macmillan.org.uk/cancervoices

A UK-wide network that enables people who have or have had cancer, and those close to them such as family and carers, to speak out about their experience of cancer.

Maggie's

Tel **0300 123 1801**

www.maggies.org

Has a network of centres in many locations throughout the UK. Provides free information about cancer and financial benefits. Also offers emotional and social support to people with cancer, their family, and friends.

Penny Brohn UK

Helpline **0303 3000 118**

www.pennybrohn.org.uk

Offers physical, emotional and spiritual support across the UK, using complementary therapies and self-help techniques.

Counselling

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

Tel **0145 588 3300**

www.bacp.co.uk

Promotes awareness of counselling and signposts people to appropriate services across the UK. You can also search for a qualified counsellor on the therapy directory page.

Emotional and mental health support

Samaritans

Helpline **116 123**

Email **jo@samaritans.org**

www.samaritans.org

Provides confidential and non-judgemental emotional support, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, for people experiencing feelings of distress or despair.

LGBT-specific support

LGBT Foundation

Tel **0345 330 3030**

lgbt.foundation

Provides a range of services to the LGBT community, including a helpline, email advice and counselling. The website has information on various topics including sexual health, relationships, mental health, community groups and events.

OUTpatients

www.outpatients.org.uk

A safe space for anybody who identifies as part of the queer spectrum and has had an experience with any kind of cancer at any stage. Also produces resources about LGBT cancer experiences. OUTpatients runs a peer support group with Maggie's Barts.

Support for carers

Carers UK

Helpline **0808 808 7777**

www.carersuk.org

Offers information and support to carers across the UK. Has an online forum and can put people in contact with local support groups for carers.

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 Dr Sosie Kassab.

With thanks to: Dr Saul Berkovitz, Clinical Director; Dr Mike Cummings, Medical Director, British Medical Acupuncture Society; Ceris Fender-Reid, Head of Complementary Therapies; Dr Caroline Hoffman, Mindfulness & Self-Compassion Teacher & Supervisor, Integrative Health Specialist and Researcher; Dr Alice Howarth, University Research Support (Molecular and Clinical Cancer Medicine); Dr John Hughes, Associate Professor in Integrated Medicine; Michael Marshall, Project Director; Adrian Richards, Complementary Massage Therapist; and Dr Jacqui Stringer, Nurse Consultant, Integrative Oncology.

Thanks also to the other professionals and 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

Sources

Below is a sample of the sources used in our complementary therapies information. If you would like more information about the sources we use, please contact us at **informationproductionteam@macmillan.org.uk**

Balneaves LG, Watling CZ, Hayward EN, Ross B, Taylor-Brown J, Porcino A, Truant TLO. Addressing Complementary and Alternative Medicine Use Among Individuals With Cancer: An Integrative Review and Clinical Practice Guideline. *J Natl Cancer Inst.* 2022 Jan 11; 114(1):25–37. Available from: doi: 10.1093/jnci/djab048. PMID: 33769512; PMCID: PMC8755493 [accessed September 2023].

Integrative Medicine [Internet]. Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. 2020. Available from: www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/diagnosis-treatment/symptom-management/integrative-medicine [accessed September 2023].

NICE. Guidance on Cancer Services Improving Supportive and Palliative Care for Adults with Cancer. The Manual National Institute for Clinical Excellence [Internet]. 2019. Available from: www.nice.org.uk/guidance/csg4/resources/improving-supportive-and-palliative-care-for-adults-with-cancer-pdf-773375005 [accessed September 2023].

Overview of complementary, alternative, and integrative medicine practices in oncology care, and potential risks and harm. UpToDate. Available from: www.uptodate.com/contents/overview-of-complementary-alternative-and-integrative-medicine-practices-in-oncology-care-and-potential-risks-and-harm [accessed September 2023, subscription only].

Can you do something to help?

We hope this booklet 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



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 about complementary therapies. It talks about the most common therapies used by some people with cancer.

The booklet tells you where you might be able to have complementary therapies and what different therapies may involve.

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.

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Patient Information Forum