

DIAGNOSED WITH BREAST CANCER: WHAT NOW?



**BREAST
CANCER
NOW**

The research
& care charity

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ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

This booklet is for anyone who has recently been diagnosed with primary breast cancer.

It offers tips on coping in the weeks or months after diagnosis, getting the information you need and finding support.

It also includes a brief overview of treatment. You may find it useful to read our **Treating primary breast cancer** booklet, which has more information about the different treatments for breast cancer.

Breast Cancer Now has a range of support services for people affected by breast cancer. You'll find more details throughout this booklet.

All quotes are from people who have been diagnosed with breast cancer.

COPING AFTER A DIAGNOSIS

There's no right or wrong way to feel after a diagnosis of breast cancer.

You'll probably go through many emotions, from fear, shock and anger to disbelief, sadness and numbness.

Your emotions may change day to day or even hour to hour. It's usual to have times when you feel very low followed by times when things seem more positive.

The days and weeks immediately after a diagnosis can be particularly emotional and may feel overwhelming.

Many people start to feel a bit calmer or less anxious once they have been told about their treatment plan.

'When they told us at the hospital it was breast cancer, I was in complete shock – I felt numb.'

Tracy

Things you can try that may help you cope

- **Think about how you coped with previous trauma or stress** – you could try using these methods again now
- **Use your breast care nurse** – they can help you understand your diagnosis and treatment options and support you during your treatment and beyond
- **Be kind to yourself** – it may help to take time to rest, eat healthily, keep active and, when you can, do something you enjoy
- **Talk to family and friends about how you're feeling** – talking about your cancer can be a way of coping with what has happened

If you're feeling overwhelmed

It's normal to feel overwhelmed when you've been diagnosed with cancer.

It can be hard to think straight or carry out normal everyday activities.

Some people have physical symptoms such as loss of appetite, diarrhoea or difficulty sleeping.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, it can help to talk to your GP. They can offer support and medication that can help in the short term.

'As soon as the consultant said the word "cancer", I didn't hear anything else.'

Jo

We're here if you're finding it hard to cope

Many people find it easier to talk to someone other than family or friends.

Calling our Helpline offers the chance to talk openly in a safe and confidential space without worrying about upsetting or protecting those close to you.

Call our Helpline free on 0808 800 6000.

Our Helpline staff are used to talking to people who are finding it hard to cope after a breast cancer diagnosis.

We're used to hearing all sorts of reactions – nothing is surprising or unusual.

Calls are answered by an experienced breast care nurse or one of our trained staff who have a personal or work-related experience of breast cancer.

Whatever your reason for calling, we'll respond in a friendly, understanding and professional way.

Our Helpline staff can also talk to you about your treatment and what to expect, as well as relevant services or information.

If you prefer to communicate by writing you can email our nurses. To find out how visit [breastcancer.org/contactnurses](https://www.breastcancer.org/contactnurses)

You can also post your question in the Ask Our Nurses section of our Forum [forum.breastcancer.org](https://www.breastcancer.org/forum)

Dealing with stress and anxiety

It's common to feel stressed and anxious after a diagnosis of breast cancer.

Some people experience anxiety for the first time. Others may have had anxiety in the past, and their cancer diagnosis can make their anxiety worse.

There are many ways to reduce stress and anxiety including:

- **Distraction** – focusing on things around you, or a hobby or interest, to shut out negative thoughts
- **Relaxation, visualisation, mindfulness and meditation** – these can be used separately or together to reduce stress and tension
- **Exercise** – regular physical activity, whether it's a brisk walk or yoga, can help clear your mind and reduce your stress levels
- **One-to-one counselling** – explore feelings such as anger, anxiety and grief, which can be related to your cancer diagnosis, making them easier to understand and cope with
- **Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)** – can help you to change patterns of thinking and behaviour that may be stopping you from moving forward

If you think you might benefit from these techniques, your breast care nurse or GP may be able to advise you on how to access them.

'The worst time was in the middle of the night when rational thought seems to go out of the window.'

Rebecca

Telling family and friends

Breaking the news of your breast cancer to family and friends can be very difficult, and you might worry about how they will react. People you tell may find it hard to know what to say.

Who you tell and how you tell them is a very personal decision.

It can help to start with the basic facts about your diagnosis and treatment options, and let the conversation progress naturally from there.

You may find it easier to tell people in an email or letter, and then perhaps discuss it with them later.

Some people use private groups on social media (such as Facebook) or WhatsApp as they find it easier updating everyone together and not having to repeat themselves to different people.

Make sure you are clear about who they can tell if you don't want everyone to know.

Telling children

If you have children, especially younger ones, deciding what to tell them may be one of the most challenging things you have to face.

It's probably best to be open and honest as it can be less frightening for them to know what's going on, even if they don't fully understand.

You can find more information about talking to children on our website **breastcancernow.org**

'I decided early on always to be honest with my kids. I have had many difficult and awkward conversations, but I have kept my promise to them and myself.'

Elke

Talking to your employer

You don't have to tell your employer about your diagnosis and treatment if you don't want to.

How much information you give about your breast cancer to people at work is a personal decision.

You have the right for any information you do provide to be kept private and only discussed with other people with your permission.

Your employer also has a duty to make reasonable adjustments to your role or working environment to help you do your job. If you don't tell them about your diagnosis and treatment, it may be difficult for them to know what adjustments to make.

'I only told those who worked closely with me about my diagnosis, and the support I received from such a small network was incredible.'

Toria

GETTING THE INFORMATION YOU NEED

After your diagnosis you may want to learn everything you can about your breast cancer and what it means. Knowing about the possible treatments can help you decide what to do next if you're offered a choice.

Alternatively, you may choose to leave it to your treatment team to decide the best approach to your treatment and what information you need.

Everyone's different when it comes to the amount of information they want.

'The hospital told me about Breast Cancer Now. I ordered some of their publications to understand more about my treatment and how I might manage my side effects better.'

Tracy

'I didn't want any information. I knew if I googled it I would think I was going to die. My partner did all the research and drip fed me the positive bits.'

Corrine

Taking things in

It can be difficult to take everything in when you first hear you have cancer.

You may only remember a small amount of what's said to you at first.

You may need time and help to get the facts straight, understand what they mean and to ask questions that are important to you.

If possible, it can be useful to take someone with you to appointments who can listen and help you remember what was said.

Any information you receive should be accurate and relevant to you. For example, a treatment that's right for one person with breast cancer may not be right for another.

The people who have the most information about your cancer are those in the treatment team looking after you.

Your breast care nurse

Most people will meet a breast care nurse during the early days of diagnosis and treatment. They are there to offer support and information to you and your family.

Often, they will be able to spend some time with you, helping you understand your options and supporting you.

Once treatment has finished, you can usually continue to contact your breast care nurse if you have any worries or concerns, or need ongoing support, even if this is many years after you've been diagnosed. For some people this may mean asking their GP to refer them back to their treatment team.

Asking questions

If you have questions, it may help to make a list and take it with you so you don't forget to ask. It can also help to take notes during your appointment.

If you're unclear about something you're told, ask to have it explained again.

You can ask whoever you feel most comfortable with. This may be your breast care nurse, oncologist or someone else in your treatment team.

If they don't know the answer they should be able to find it out for you.

Sometimes it's not possible to give a definite answer to a question, but they should be able to explain why if this is the case.

Many hospitals also have a cancer information centre that can provide a wide range of information and support and details of other local support services.

Understanding information about your cancer

A doctor called a pathologist will look at the tissue removed during a biopsy or surgery under a microscope. Other tests will also be done on the tissue to get more information.

The results give details about the breast cancer that helps determine the treatment you're offered.

For more information to help you understand your results, you can read our booklet **Understanding your pathology results**.

Finding information you can trust

Breast Cancer Now's health information is written by our clinical specialists and reviewed by healthcare professionals and people affected by breast cancer.

We have printed and online information on all aspects of breast cancer from diagnosis to treatment and beyond.

For online information you can trust, visit breastcancer.org

To find out about our publications visit breastcancer.org/publications or call our Helpline on **0808 800 6000**.

Macmillan Cancer Support (macmillan.org.uk) and Cancer Research UK (cancerresearchuk.org) also provide reliable information on many different topics.

'I found Breast Cancer Now's booklets so helpful, and started to order each one I felt was appropriate, throughout my treatment.'

Margaret

HAVING TREATMENT

Your treatment team will discuss your treatment options with you and prepare a treatment plan.

Making decisions about treatment

You can take some time to think or talk things over before you make any decisions about your treatment.

A few days spent making sure you have all the information you need about your treatment won't make any difference to the outcome and may help you to feel more in control of what's happening to you.

It can help to talk through decisions with someone else. Some people prefer to talk to a partner, family member or close friend, while others may feel more comfortable talking with someone in their treatment team such as their breast care nurse.

Questions to ask your treatment team

Questions you might want to ask your treatment team include:

- Why is this the best treatment for me?
- When will treatment start?
- How long will my treatment take?
- What are the possible side effects?
- Are there any long-term side effects?
- How will the treatment affect my everyday life?
- Where will I need to go for treatment?

Which treatments?

Most people are recommended a combination of treatments.

These may include:

- Surgery
- Chemotherapy
- Radiotherapy
- Hormone (endocrine) therapy
- Targeted (biological) therapy
- Bisphosphonates

You can find out more about the different treatment options in our booklet **Treating primary breast cancer**.

More detailed information can be found in our booklets on chemotherapy, radiotherapy and individual hormone therapy, targeted therapy and bisphosphonate drugs.

You can also find information on all of these treatments on our website.

‘Time seemed to pass quickly from surgery to chemotherapy to radiotherapy. I didn’t have time to think about what was happening.’

Bal

Coping with the effects of treatment

The treatments you have are likely to affect how you look and feel.

For example, surgery can cause changes to your appearance. Getting information about your operation and what to expect afterwards can help prepare you. Our booklet **Your operation and recovery** may help.

Depending on your treatment you may see other changes in your appearance such as skin changes, hair loss or changes to your weight.

Even though these effects may be temporary, they can be very upsetting. Side effects like hair loss can also be an outward sign of having cancer.

Fatigue is a very common side effect of breast cancer treatment and may continue after your treatment has finished.

Treatments such as chemotherapy and hormone therapy can cause menopausal symptoms like hot flushes.

If you're worried about any side effects, talk to a member of your treatment team as most side effects can be managed or controlled.

Information to help you cope

Breast Cancer Now has a range of booklets about coping with the effects of treatment, including:

- Breast cancer and hair loss
- Breast prostheses, bras and clothes after surgery
- Menopausal symptoms and breast cancer
- Your operation and recovery

You can also find information on the side effects of different treatments, as well as tips on coping with fatigue, on breastcancernow.org

‘I did struggle to look in the mirror at first and still don’t always like what I see.’

Sarah

‘I couldn’t understand why I struggled to do things, e.g. a 10-minute walk to the local shops was taking me 20–30 minutes.’

Madeleine

GETTING THE SUPPORT YOU NEED

Practical support

Many people want to carry on doing as much as possible during their treatment. However, side effects can often make it more difficult to continue with everyday tasks.

Friends and family are often keen to help with practical tasks such as:

- Cleaning and vacuuming
- Clothes washing and ironing
- Gardening
- Cooking meals for freezing
- Transport to and from hospital appointments
- Taking children to or from school
- Babysitting

If you live alone or don't have close family or friends nearby, you may not have as much support as you would like.

Often, even people you don't know that well are willing to help in times of need.

They may be neighbours, colleagues, friends of friends, members of your church or any other social group you're part of. You may find it difficult to ask, but people are often keen to help out if they know how.

You can also ask your local cancer information centre if there are any local organisations that provide support for people who are coping with cancer on their own.

'I've found that everyone, from my closest family to the girl at the eyebrow bar, is really pleased to help, and often go above and beyond. However, they won't know what you want unless you spell it out.'

Rebecca

Emotional support

Sometimes it can seem like no one really understands how you feel.

Talking to other people in a similar situation may help reduce feelings of anxiety, isolation or fear.

Someone Like Me

Our Someone Like Me service can match you to a trained volunteer who has had breast cancer too and who has experience of the issues you're facing.

They will listen without judgment, offer emotional support and practical tips, and share their own experiences where relevant. They can support you and be there for you if you just need someone to talk to.

You can talk over the phone or chat by email.

'I was really helped by Breast Cancer Now's Someone Like Me service, as the person who I had been assigned could completely understand and relate to what I was saying.'

Emma

Forum

Through our online Forum **forum.breastcancernow.org** you can exchange tips, ask questions, share experiences and talk through concerns.

Dedicated areas for popular topics make it easy for you to find what you're looking for.

The Forum is simple to use and professionally hosted. There's always someone online, whether you're feeling anxious or just need to hear from someone who understands.

Support groups

Breast cancer support groups can provide a sense of community, an opportunity to share your experiences and learn different ways of dealing with problems.

To find out about a support group in your area ask your breast care nurse or contact your local cancer information centre.

THE FUTURE

For some people, the last hospital-based treatment is the goal they focus on, and getting there can feel like a real achievement. But some people also feel isolated, low or anxious when hospital-based treatment has finished and regular appointments stop.

Our booklet **After breast cancer treatment: what now?** explains what happens after hospital-based treatments end. It includes information on follow-up care, how you might feel after treatment ends and coping with worries about cancer coming back.

Our **Moving Forward** booklet contains information and tips to help you adjust to life after treatment.

You may also like to try Becca, the breast cancer support app. Becca gives you strategies, hints and tips to empower you for life beyond breast cancer treatment.

‘Going through this whole experience made me stronger, wiser, more positive and I certainly appreciate every single day.’

Fran

HELP US TO HELP OTHERS

Breast Cancer Now is a charity that relies on voluntary donations and gifts in wills. If you have found this information helpful, please visit breastcancer.org/give to support our vital care and research work.

ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

Diagnosed with breast cancer: what now? was written by Breast Cancer Now's clinical specialists, and reviewed by healthcare professionals and people affected by breast cancer.



For a full list of the sources we used to research it:
Email health-info@breastcancer.org



You can order or download more copies from
breastcancer.org/publications



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BREAST CANCER

NOW The research
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At Breast Cancer Now we're powered by our life-changing care. Our breast care nurses, expertly trained staff and volunteers, and award-winning information make sure anyone diagnosed with breast cancer can get the support they need to help them to live well with the physical and emotional impact of the disease.

We're here for anyone affected by breast cancer. And we always will be.

For breast cancer care, support and information, call us free on **0808 800 6000** or visit **breastcancernow.org**

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Patient Information Forum

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