

PRACTICAL HELP

I've always been a person who gives help, not asks for it. Now I have breast cancer, how do I ask for help?

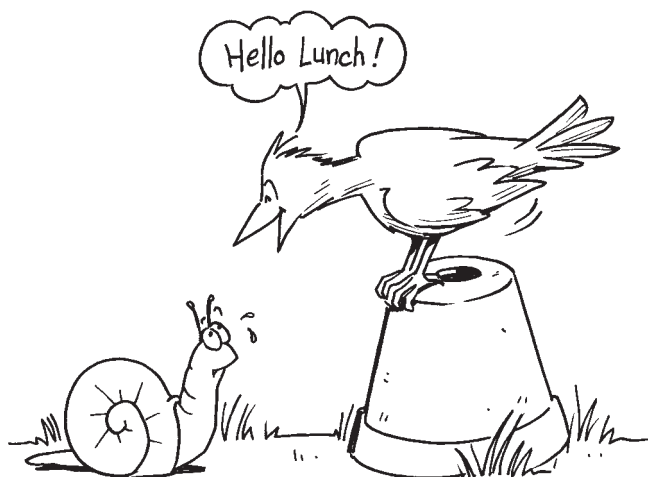
Look at this the other way round. Relatives and friends often find it hard to know where to start to help someone who is having treatment for breast cancer, or recovering from treatment. Asking for support means that people can feel useful and helpful, and you don't have to try to be superhuman to cope with everyday life on top of treatment. People do like to help.

Initially you could ask for help with practical things like picking up your children from school, helping to do your shopping, cooking a meal for you, or you could ask for company when you have hospital appointments. Then as time goes on and people offer their help, do take it or ask them if they would mind doing something else instead if there is a task you need doing.

DIET

Do I need to be careful about what I eat now I am having treatment?

It is sensible to eat a well-balanced diet because it is better for your general health. For most of us, eating a better balanced diet means having less fatty food, cutting down on our salt intake and eating more fibre in the form of fresh vegetables and cereals. Eating this type of diet is good for everyone, not just for people who have had breast cancer. A balanced diet will make sure that you get the vitamins and minerals you need to help your body to recover from any treatment you have had and to build you up again.



Do I need a special diet now I know I have breast cancer?

Some people choose to follow a particular complementary diet when they have breast cancer and continue with this after their hospital treatment ends. If you wish to try a new eating plan which is very different from your usual diet, make sure you let the hospital doctor know what you are planning. This is because some diets could make certain side effects of treatment, such as diarrhoea, rather worse or last longer. It might be better to wait until these are over before changing to a new style of eating. Information about some specific complementary diets can be found in Chapter 4.

Will changing my diet help to prevent my cancer from coming back?

There is no research which suggests that changing your diet would do this. Some people claim certain diets have helped to cure their breast cancer but there is no convincing evidence to support these claims. Do speak to your doctors about any diets you are considering

because some of them can affect other parts of the body. For example, after the menopause women's bones become thinner and they are at a higher risk of osteoporosis (thinning of the bones) so a diet without calcium can be harmful to bones.

DRINKING ALCOHOL

What about drinking alcohol if you have breast cancer?

You should avoid having too much alcohol as it is not good for your general health. An occasional short, glass of wine or a beer is unlikely to be harmful. UK guidelines suggest women should not drink more than two units of alcohol a day (one unit is a small glass of wine, a single measure of spirits or half a pint of beer or cider). For men the maximum is three units daily. Table 1 (overleaf) gives more information.

SMOKING

I've got breast cancer. Should I stop smoking?

Whilst the strict medical answer to this is going to be 'yes', it is not quite that simple. If you have breast cancer, then you may want to adopt a new approach to life in general which could include giving up smoking. But while it is clear that smoking is a major cause of lung cancer and heart disease, there is no evidence that it causes breast cancer or will affect the chances of your breast cancer coming back. As well as this the stress of giving up on top of the stress of coping with a diagnosis and treatment can make it a big extra burden you might not feel you can face just now – and if you don't succeed, you may feel even worse. Some people find that while having chemotherapy they go off smoking anyway.

If you need help to give up, talk to your GP.

Table 1 Alcoholic drinks and units

Drink	Serving size	Units of alcohol
Spirits, e.g. whisky, vodka, rum, gin	25 mL	1
Spirits, e.g. whisky, vodka, rum, gin	35 mL	1.5
Lager, 3.5–4.5% vol (e.g. Tennent's, Fosters)	pint	2.2
Lager, premium, Special Brew	pint	4.5
Lager, alcohol free, bottled	300 mL	Trace
Beer (bitter)	pint	2.2
Stout, Guinness	pint	2.4
Cider, dry	pint	2.7
Cider, sweet	pint	2.7
Wine, dry white or red, 12.5% vol	125 mL	1.6
Wine, dry white or red, 12.5% vol	175 mL	2.2
Wine, med. white, 12.5% vol	125 mL	1.6
Wine, sparkling, 10% vol	125 mL	1.2
Sherry, dry, 20% vol	50 mL	1
Sherry, med. 20 % vol	50 mL	1
Port	50 mL	1

EXERCISE

Should I be taking exercise during treatment and after it has finished?

Exercise is good to stimulate the heart and to tone up flabby muscle, but if you are not used to exercising regularly, you should be careful. Don't start to do too much too soon, either during your treatment or afterwards, as you do not want to tire yourself out. Gentle, regular exercise throughout your treatment and beyond is far better for your body than sudden, strenuous activity when treatment is over.

If you are used to doing regular exercise, gym workouts or playing team sports, you may need to reduce what you do while having treatment and then increase slowly as side effects ease. It is a good idea to take advice from your oncologist, breast care nurse or a fitness professional about this.

Research is suggesting that taking exercise after breast cancer may improve the chances of it not coming back, so this is another reason why regular exercise is a good idea.

I am nearly finished with my treatment. Are there any forms of exercise which are better than others for me to take up now?

It is well known that swimming is a good way of exercising your whole body. However, you should avoid swimming if, for example, you have recently completed a course of radiotherapy – your skin will be sensitive on the part of your body that was treated, and chlorine could make any skin reaction to treatment worse. Some gym activities might be good to help you build up muscle tone again but you should try to find a balance between this type of exercise and pushing yourself too hard.

In general, if you are used to doing one particular type of exercise, then you may wish to continue with it. However, you might need to modify how much you do to take account of the fact that your body is not quite back to its usual state. Check with your doctor or breast

care nurse before doing any exercise that involves heavy lifting or shoulder movements on the side of your axillary surgery.

THE SUN

Can I sit out in the sun after I've had breast cancer?

Yes you can, but do be careful. If you have had radiotherapy, the area treated will be much more sensitive to sun and you can easily burn. Use a high factor sunblock and keep the areas where you had treatment covered during the hottest times of the day.

Can I swim in the sea or a pool if it is sunny?

If you are swimming when there is strong sunlight, you should put on a waterproof sunblock and then cover up any treated area if possible. For example, you could wear a T-shirt. Better still, avoid the strongest sunlight. Remember to take care even if it is cloudy, as the sun's rays still filter through.

HOLIDAYS

Can I go on holiday straight after having treatment?

Usually, yes. It can be very beneficial to get away and rest in order to build yourself up again. However, you may find you still have some side effects and so you may want to wait a little longer before taking a break. This will depend on when you finished your treatment and what the treatment was. It is a good idea to check with your oncologist or breast care nurse before making plans.

If you are planning to go to a hot climate, or on a winter sports holiday, do take notice of the points mentioned above about the sun.

Can I get holiday insurance if I have had breast cancer?

Yes, there is holiday and travel insurance available for people who have had cancer. If you are booking a holiday through a travel agent be sure to check the small print in any insurance cover offered to you because you may find you are excluded from some of the cover. You must always declare your breast cancer otherwise any claims could be invalidated even if you are claiming for something unrelated to breast cancer or its treatment. Sometimes holiday insurance can be more expensive after treatment for breast cancer, so you may need to shop around to get a reasonable deal. Some of the organisations listed in the Appendix will be able to provide you with more information about holiday insurance.

I have finished my treatment now. Is it safe for me to have a vaccination before I go on holiday?

Before you plan to go to any country that would require you to have any sort of vaccination or medication, you should check with the oncologist to see if it is safe to proceed. If you have recently had treatment, particularly chemotherapy, your body's defence (immune) system is quite likely to be weakened. Some vaccinations (such as for yellow fever) introduce a small amount of the virus into your body. This stimulates your body's own defence system to develop protection against the disease. If your defence system is not fully recovered from the effects of the treatment then it won't be able to react to the vaccination in the normal way, and it is likely that you will be ill. This might still apply a few months after treatment has finished.

If I need regular medication, can I take it abroad with me?

Yes, generally speaking you can, providing that you take with you a letter of explanation from your doctor. The letter should be written on headed notepaper from the hospital or practice. Make sure that you have more than enough medication in case of unforeseen delays.

Before booking a holiday, you should check with the doctor just in case the country you are going to would impose restrictions because of the type of medication you are having.

What happens if I'm taken ill while I'm away?

It is difficult to give a precise answer. It will largely depend on what the illness is and where you are. As a general guide any condition that requires hospitalisation or prolonged treatment would probably best be treated at home if you can travel. If you have doubts about any treatment offered to you while away, insist that contact is made with your doctor. If you do come back because of an illness, ensure that your family doctor and hospital doctor are informed. This is because even if the illness is not related to the cancer, there may be some treatments that are more suitable than others.

If I need to have treatment abroad, do I have to pay for it?

Yes, usually you do but there are some countries where you can receive treatment in the public health system. There are also a number of countries that have a reciprocal agreement with the UK which means that you can have treatment in that country, pay and be reimbursed by the Department of Health when you return. Check what your holiday insurance covers for healthcare abroad.

Always check before you go, perhaps with one of the organisations listed in the Appendix, and make sure you have the correct forms and know how many copies you should take with you, and so on.

SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS

Does having breast cancer mean I have to stop having a sex life?

No, it doesn't. While many people find that they are quite tired during and immediately after a course of treatment, once the side

effects have passed their desire for a sexual relationship and their interest in sex returns. If you feel you want to have sex then why not? You may need to be gentle around areas that have recently been treated, for example, after breast surgery or radiotherapy to that area because you may be sore. The emotional impact of breast cancer can play a large part in when and whether or not you want to have sex, for example, women may feel low self-esteem after breast surgery or with hair loss. This is discussed later in this chapter.

Can breast cancer treatment affect my ability to have sex?

If the chemotherapy has caused your menopause to start or if you are on hormone therapies, you may experience a dry vagina as a side effect. This in itself needn't stop you having sex but it can make you a bit sore. Speak to your doctor or breast care nurse about possible ways of relieving this symptom, for example, using a lubricant.

At present I don't feel I will ever want to have sex again. Do other people feel this way?

Yes, they do. It is quite usual for people to lose their interest in sex temporarily, during and after treatment. Usually, though, their libido returns gradually.

Occasionally, the person who has had treatment wants some intimacy but their partner finds it hard to adjust and doesn't want to cuddle or touch, or in some cases, even look at the treated area. In this situation it may be helpful to take a little time to talk, maybe focus on other parts of the body and reassure your partner that they are not hurting you.

Counselling, whether individually or as a couple, may be really helpful as it can enable both parties to explore their feelings, fears and desires. This can then help them to talk to each other and work towards accepting each other's views. It might be possible to seek the help of a sex therapist to support a couple in re-discovering an intimacy that is more satisfying to both of them.