



CARING FOR SOMEONE WITH EARLY BREAST CANCER: WHAT TO EXPECT AND HOW TO HELP

FACT SHEET

March 2019

This fact sheet was produced by Breast Cancer Network Australia

Many Australians diagnosed with breast cancer will have carers in their lives – people who have provided regular, unpaid support, personal care or assistance, both during and after treatment.

Carers can be anyone – a spouse or partner, a parent, daughters or sons, sisters or brothers, friends, colleagues, or neighbours.

Carers provide a lot of support while someone needs it. They may help with things such as organising or supporting someone at their medical appointments, managing the household, helping with bills and finances and supporting someone emotionally through a difficult time.

Sometimes carers may also provide help with day-to-day personal care, such as preparing food, helping someone with dressing or bathing, and acting as a contact person on their behalf.

You don't have to see yourself as a 'carer' to be in a caring role. You may feel that helping out in these ways is just doing what is right or that it's a part of being there for someone close to you.

Even if you don't think of yourself as a carer, your role in helping someone with breast cancer is significant, valuable and important.

If you are caring for someone with breast cancer it's natural to feel a range of worries and concerns. Knowing what to do, what to say and how best to support someone can be hard and often confusing.

This fact sheet will:

- provide useful tips and information to help you support and care for someone with breast cancer
- guide you through some of the common concerns and feelings that you might experience when becoming a carer for someone with breast cancer.



What is my role?

Generally, people being treated for breast cancer (and often their wider family) need help and support from a range of different people. Their need for help can change over time and doesn't necessarily end when treatment is finished.

Practical help in managing day-to-day things is often where carers can be most helpful. Another important aspect of caring for someone with breast cancer is the emotional support you can offer.

Experiences of providing care are different for everyone. For example, you may provide support to someone for a short time or over a number of years. You may share the care with others, such as family members or friends.

Some carers may be mostly focused on providing practical support, while for others the focus and priority may be emotional support. People who are the sole carers may be providing both types of care and taking on a whole range of responsibilities.

Whatever level of care you provide, your role is important in supporting someone through breast cancer.





How can I best care for someone with breast cancer?

Sometimes it can be hard to know where to start when it comes to helping a person with breast cancer. Below are some practical tips and strategies that might be helpful for you.

Providing practical support

Tips for partners and family members

When something is broken you immediately want to fix it, but when it comes to the most precious thing in your life, your partner, you can't, and that's very distressing. – Jacques, husband

Partners and family members often feel frustrated and helpless over not being able to 'fix' their loved one's breast cancer. If you feel this way too, the following things may help you to support them in a practical and helpful way.

- Ask the person if they would like you to go medical appointments with them and help them keep track of appointments with a schedule. Write a list of questions you might want to ask before you go, and take notes when you are there. They can be useful to refer back to.
- Prepare meals or arrange a meals delivery schedule among family members and friends.
- Coordinate visits from others, which might include creating a schedule for visits. Offer to take phone calls and update others.
- Arrange a home maintenance schedule, help run errands or offer to do a weekly grocery shop.
- A disruption to the usual routine may be a welcome relief. Perhaps organise a trip to the theatre or cinema, dinner with friends, a picnic or a walk – or simply order some take-away and watch a movie together.
- Ask other family members and friends for help. You might need to tell them exactly what you need, such as looking after children while you go grocery shopping or helping with the ironing once a fortnight.
- Call Centrelink, your local council, or community health service and ask what practical or financial assistance they may be able to provide, if you could benefit from extra assistance.
- Talk with your boss about flexible working arrangements, especially if you are the main carer.

- Consider reading about breast cancer. Some partners and family members find that getting information can help them feel more in control and better equipped to understand what is happening and what they can do to help. But for others, too much information can be overwhelming. Do what feels best for you.

BCNA's booklet *I wish I could fix it': Supporting your partner through breast cancer* has more information and tips for partners of people diagnosed with breast cancer in the last 12 months. For more information visit bcna.org.au or call 1800 500 258.

Tips for friends and colleagues

Often friends and colleagues are anxious to help but are unsure of what they can do. The important thing is to let the person (or their partners/immediate family), tell you what would be most helpful and then offer to help in specific ways.

Examples of what you can do to help might include:

- Prepare home-cooked meals, soups, biscuits and cakes that can be frozen and used when needed.
- Help with housework, gardening or looking after pets. For several weeks after surgery, hanging out washing, vacuuming and ironing may be physically difficult.
- Take your friend shopping and carry the bags, or take a list and do it for them.
- If your friend wants information, help them find it.
- If they have children, offer to help with school drop-off or pick-up or social and sporting events. Babysit for an afternoon or a day, or have the children overnight occasionally.
- Offer to drive them to medical appointments and, if they want, stay with them while they see the doctor or have treatment. Perhaps you could work out a roster of family and friends to cover each visit.
- If they live alone or have little support, they may appreciate help sorting through medical bills, Medicare claims and household expenses.

It is best to be honest and open about what you can provide. If you feel uncomfortable, or the person you are supporting is experiencing significant distress, there are many places that offer more specialised support. You might suggest they talk to their GP or a counsellor.



Keep in touch

Many people affected by breast cancer say that people are very supportive when they are first diagnosed, but the support drops off over time.

It's important to remember that just because someone has finished treatment, it does not necessarily mean they no longer need or want support and help. Checking in and offering support from time to time after treatment can be very much appreciated.

BCNA's booklet *Helping a friend or colleague with breast cancer* has more useful tips to help friends and colleagues support someone with breast cancer. For more information visit bcna.org.au or call 1800 500 258.

Providing emotional support

An important part of your role may be providing emotional support. It is common to worry about saying 'the wrong thing' or not knowing what to do for someone with breast cancer, even if you are very close to them. The following can help.

Follow their lead

Take your lead from the person you are caring for. Understand that there will be times when they don't want to talk and need time to themselves.

Be available to listen

Sometimes one of the most important things you can do is to simply listen. If someone wants advice, they are likely to ask for it. Often people just want an opportunity to voice their concerns and feel supported.

Be there and be yourself

Sometimes it is hard to know what to say – that's okay. People diagnosed with breast cancer have told us they do not like:

- hearing about the latest miracle cure or treatment someone has heard about
- horror stories about other people with cancer
- being told how they should change their lifestyle or diet
- platitudes such as 'There must be a reason for this', 'Everything will turn out well in the end' or 'You look great' – these are not helpful
- being told to 'Be positive' – this may make it hard for them to talk about how they really feel.

Remember though, you won't always say or do 'the right thing'. That's okay too. Just be yourself and be sensitive to what they may be going through.

Be honest

Try to talk honestly about how you feel. Not talking about struggles or concerns can cause tensions. If you find a topic too hard, you can say so and offer to talk about it later. It is best to be honest and open.

Common feelings and concerns of carers

It was devastating initially, it was quite a shock, because although we all know how prevalent breast cancer is, until it's happening in your immediate family you don't believe it's going to happen. – Tracy, daughter

The news that someone close to you has breast cancer will probably come as a shock. Going through breast cancer can be an emotional roller-coaster. This is often not only the case for the person diagnosed, but those who are close to them too.

The common struggles and feelings that you might experience as a carer depend a lot on the relationship you have with the person you're providing care for, and the extent of the care that you are taking on.

We all react in different ways, but it is completely normal that you might feel a whole range of emotions.

I felt a lot of fear and sadness and anxiety and I was a bit angry that something like breast cancer happens. – Jane, friend

After someone starts their breast cancer treatment they will often feel a bit better because they are doing something. However, as a carer you may feel like you are unable to do anything. This may leave you feeling frustrated, worried or even guilty. It can be especially hard if you are the type of person who likes to fix things.

Fighting breast cancer is a long haul, with ups and downs. It has to be faced as a long journey. – John, partner

When a caring role significantly impacts on your life day-to-day, it can sometimes feel overwhelming. It is important to look after yourself too.



BCNA's fact sheet *You're important too: looking after yourself as a carer* has information on a wide range of practical, financial, emotional and social supports that can help you, as well as tips for looking after yourself. For more information visit bcna.org.au or call 1800 500 258.

At some point, your role as a carer may come to an end, or the person you've cared for might not need as much help anymore. This can sometimes be difficult to adjust to, as you may have changed a lot as a result of caring for someone close to you. It can be hard to resume life as it was before. It is important to make the transition back to work or other commitments gradually and at your own pace. Reach out if you need help or support.

Despite the challenges of caring for someone with breast cancer, many carers can also find a sense of personal meaning, strength, purpose and satisfaction from helping someone close to them.

Here to help

Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA) works to support, inform, represent and connect Australians affected by breast cancer.

We have a wide range of free information available including booklets, fact sheets, videos and podcasts. This information can be viewed or ordered at bcna.org.au or by calling our Helpline on 1800 500 258.

Feeling overwhelmed or have further questions?

My Journey online tool

Our new My Journey online tool is available to provide quality, evidence-based information and support tailored to your individual needs and circumstances at all stages of your breast cancer journey. My Journey can be found at bcna.org.au/myjourney

Online Network

BCNA's online network exists to connect you with others going through a similar situation at any time during the night and day. The online network can be found at onlinenetwork.bcna.org.au

BCNA Helpline

Our Helpline cancer nurses are available to help you with any questions you may have. Call 1800 500 258.