

# Breast cancer and your child's school Factsheet

This factsheet is to help people affected by breast cancer communicate with their child's school about their diagnosis and treatment.

**Whatever the age of your child, your relationship with their school will be important following your diagnosis and during treatment. Your child and you will need the school to be understanding of your situation.**

We hope this information helps you to work with your child's school to ensure that everyone concerned is supported as well as possible after your diagnosis. You may prefer to let your partner, family member or friend liaise with the school on your behalf. If so it might be useful to pass on this factsheet.

Throughout this publication we refer to the child in the singular – if you have more than one child, either at the same school or a different one, you might need more than one copy of this factsheet.

You may also find it helpful to read our **Talking with your children about breast cancer** booklet and **Breast cancer and childcare** factsheet. Our children's book **Mummy's Lump** may help you explain breast cancer if you have a child under seven years.

### **Why is it important to tell my child's school?**

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At the time of diagnosis and throughout your treatment you will experience a variety of emotions. How you feel is individual to you – there's no list of right or wrong feelings and no order you must have them in. Your child will also have a variety of feelings. They may not tell you they are worried but fear and uncertainty may affect their behaviour (in or out of school), school work and friendships. School is an important part of your child's life and the teachers and other children can provide stability and support at a time of change at home.

Being a parent or guardian can be very challenging. If you are also having treatment for breast cancer you will have many changes to cope with both physically and emotionally. Interacting with your child's school can at times feel daunting but by working with the school you will enable staff to plan and provide the help and support that you would prefer for your child and you.

### **What should I do when I'm first diagnosed?**

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It is helpful for your child's school to know as soon as possible after your diagnosis. This ensures that staff can support you and your child as fully as they can at such a difficult time. It may be you who tells them, another member of your family or a friend.

### **Who should I tell?**

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This may be the head teacher, your child's form/class teacher or another teacher you feel able to talk to. Some schools may also have a member of staff who oversees pastoral care such as a school nurse. It is usually helpful to tell the school in person so that they can ask any questions straight away. If that's not possible you could make initial contact through a telephone call, letter or email.

### **What should I tell them?**

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It can be helpful to think through what you would like to tell the school before you get in touch. As well as your diagnosis you may want to tell them about any treatment that is planned and any change in practical arrangements. Sometimes as a parent or guardian you can feel a lack of privacy – do remember that you can share as much or as little as you choose. You do not need to tell them all that you know, unless you want to. You might find the tear-out section for schools in this factsheet helpful.

## How can I help my child talk about my cancer at school?

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You know your child best. If you have discussed your cancer with them you will have explained it, and the treatment that you are to have, in a way that helps them to understand and be reassured. The amount of information that you have shared with your child will be personal to you and your situation. Our **Talking with your children about breast cancer** booklet may be helpful for you to read and you could consider giving a copy to your school.

Your child may need or want to tell other people about your cancer, or they may not wish to discuss it at all. They may also be asked questions about your cancer. Talking with them about how they might do this can be very helpful. You could discuss the words they might use and explain that they need only tell people as much as they want. It might also be useful to find out who your child feels comfortable talking to at school if they are worried or frightened, so that you can tell the school.

## How might the school help me and my child?

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Think about what support you would like from the school and be clear when asking for it – teachers often won't know how to help unless you tell them. You could use the tear-out section for schools in this factsheet to help with this. Although schools tend to be busy places, the staff will want to try and support you and your child as best they can, but may not always be able to do everything that you ask.

The following may be helpful to consider.

- Work out with the school two people (link people) who you can liaise with throughout your treatment.
- Confirm a telephone number and email address that will enable you to contact them directly.
- Agree with the link people which other members of staff they tell at the school and what information they share.
- Decide how they can feed back to you important information regarding your child's wellbeing – for example if your child has had a 'sad day'.
- Sometimes appointments overrun. Work out who you would need to speak to and how you would contact them if this happened.
- Give the school the names and contact details of any adults who can collect your child from school if you can't.
- Consider letting your link people know if there are family tensions that may have an impact on your child's wellbeing.
- Agree with your child which staff they would like to go to if they need to talk to someone.
- Consider letting the school know the words you use when discussing your diagnosis with your child so they can continue to use the same language and avoid using words your child might not know.



- If your child is preparing for exams, you might want to send a letter to the school (to the exams officer if your school has one) explaining how the situation at home may be affecting your child. The school can then apply to the exam board for special consideration for each exam. This is only likely to happen if you request it.
- If your child has special needs you might find it useful to ask the school for support or guidance in deciding what information to tell your child and how to do it.

### My child is my carer

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If you are a single parent or guardian and your child is your carer – in anything from a minor to a very significant role – then it's a good idea to let your child's school know this so that additional support can be given to your child.

If you think it would be useful, [click here](#) for the 'tear out section', fill out the relevant information and give it to your child's school.

For more information see our publications:  
**Talking with children about breast cancer BCC50**  
**Breast cancer and childcare BCC37**  
**Mummy's Lump BCC164**

To order, or download a copy, please visit  
[www.breastcancercare.org.uk/publications](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk/publications)

## Information for schools about breast cancer Tear-out section

**Breast Cancer Care is here for anyone affected by breast cancer. We bring people together, provide information and support, and campaign for improved standards of care. We use our understanding of people's experience of breast cancer and our clinical expertise in everything we do.**

The following pages have been extracted from our factsheet **Breast cancer and your child's school**, designed to help people affected by breast cancer communicate with their child's school about their diagnosis and treatment.

This tear-out section is for people to give to their child's school following a diagnosis of breast cancer, so that the school can provide appropriate help and support during treatment for breast cancer, and beyond. The following information is private and confidential.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

I am the parent/guardian of: \_\_\_\_\_ in class: \_\_\_\_\_

The following information is for the attention of:

\_\_\_\_\_

My child and I would also like the following members of staff to know:

I would/would not like this information to be shared with other members of staff.

I have been diagnosed with breast cancer and will be having the following treatment:

- surgery
- chemotherapy
- radiotherapy
- hormone therapy
- targeted cancer therapies, eg trastuzumab (Herceptin).

The treatment is due to start on:

I will keep you updated as necessary.

My child has been told the following:

These are the words I have used with my child:

I have avoided using the following words with my child:

We have shared this book/booklet together:

I enclose/do not enclose a copy of the booklet for the staff at school.

Signature of parent/guardian: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

My preferred contact number is: \_\_\_\_\_

If I'm not available and you need to get in touch please contact:

\_\_\_\_\_ on: \_\_\_\_\_

Being diagnosed with breast cancer can have a major impact on everyday life and many people feel overwhelmed by their daily routines. If a child at your school has a parent or guardian with breast cancer, this will often affect the practical details of their school life. Breast cancer is also likely to have an emotional impact – on the person diagnosed and those around them. While everyone reacts differently, the parent or guardian and their child may need the school's support during the course of their treatment for breast cancer.

Breast Cancer Care has highlighted some of the issues below that you may wish to consider when supporting my child (and me) during my treatment. I have ticked all of those that are particularly important to me at this time.

- Receiving/returning information may not be as efficient as usual – please remind me if I do not respond in the time period required.
- Ensuring my child has the right equipment each day for school may be difficult – please would you make allowances for my child and let me know if this is a problem.
- Delivering/collecting my child at school may cause me anxiety – can I deliver/collect them from a different place/early?
- I may not be able to walk as far as usual – can I park nearer the school?
- Is anyone at school able to help my child with their homework?

- Due to my cancer diagnosis we have had a change in financial circumstances – can I discuss with you financial support for school dinners/extra curricular activities/school trips/school fees?
- It is more difficult for our family to do things outside school – I'd like to request priority access to after school clubs/trips for my child.
- My child may need additional emotional support during school trips/residential trips/free time.
- It is difficult for me to arrive early for school events – could I have a seat reserved for me?
- My child may find it difficult if cancer is discussed in school – would you let me know if there are plans for assemblies/lessons/charity events connected to cancer so that I can talk with my child beforehand?
- My child is preparing for exams – what additional support can you give my child with their preparation/taking their exams? For example, are you able to apply to exam boards for special consideration?
- Are there any school support services that may be helpful to my child? Please do not refer them without my prior agreement.
- My immunity is lowered with chemotherapy, which means I am more likely to get infections. If possible, please would you let me know if my child has been in contact with someone at school with an illness such as diarrhoea and vomiting, flu, chicken pox or shingles?

## Information about breast cancer

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Breast cancer can affect both women and men. There are several types of breast cancer. Primary breast cancer is cancer that has started in the breast and is not known to have spread to other parts of the body. Secondary breast cancer is breast cancer that has spread to another part of the body. It can't be cured but it can be controlled, sometimes for years. The possible treatments are listed below and these may be given alone or in any combination or order. There are some common side effects, but two people receiving the same combination of treatments may experience different side effects and feel completely differently, both during and after their treatment.

### Surgery

Surgery is usually the first treatment for most women with breast cancer. They may have a lump or the entire breast removed (lumpectomy/wide local excision or mastectomy). They may also have lymph nodes in the armpit removed, which can lead to lymphoedema (where the arm on the affected side swells and feels uncomfortable and heavy). Women who have a mastectomy may also have breast reconstruction, either at the same time or at a later date.

### Chemotherapy

If chemotherapy is given it is usually after surgery (although it can be given before) and before radiotherapy to destroy any cancer cells that may have spread from the breast to other parts of the body. Chemotherapy is given as a series of treatments over a period of four to six months. Some of the most common side effects are nausea, hair loss or thinning, fatigue (extreme and unpredictable tiredness) and menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes.

### Radiotherapy

Radiotherapy uses high energy x-rays to destroy any cancer cells left behind in the breast area after surgery and/or chemotherapy.

People affected by breast cancer will usually have radiotherapy five days a week for three to six weeks, although this can vary. Some of the most common side effects are fatigue, skin damage and lymphoedema (see 'Surgery' above).

### Hormone therapies

Hormone therapies work in different ways to block the effect of hormones on cancer cells. There are several different types of hormone therapy drugs commonly used to treat primary and secondary breast cancer. They are usually taken over several years. Side effects include menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes, weight gain and painful joints.

### Targeted cancer therapies

This is the name for a group of drugs that block the growth and spread of cancer. The best known of these is trastuzumab (Herceptin), which is usually given every three weeks over a year. Side effects include flu-like symptoms and nausea.

After treatment has finished, many people find that the healing process, both physical and emotional, takes many months or years as they may still be experiencing side effects from treatment and coming to terms with their diagnosis of breast cancer.

## Further support

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### Breast Cancer Care

If you'd like any further information or support call our free Helpline on **0808 800 600** (Text Relay **18001**). You may also find it helpful to visit our website or email your questions to our Ask the Nurse service. Our free Information Resources include factsheets, booklets and DVDs. You can order our publications by using our order form, which can be requested from the Helpline. All our publications can also be ordered and downloaded from our website.

## Other organisations

### Cancer Talk

Website: [www.cancertalk.org.uk](http://www.cancertalk.org.uk)

A Macmillan funded webpage specifically aimed at providing information and support for teachers supporting children affected by cancer.

### Riprap

Website: [www.riprap.org.uk](http://www.riprap.org.uk)

A website offering support and advice for children aged 12–16 who have a parent or guardian with cancer. Includes real-life stories, discussion forums, information and tips.

### Why bother

Website: [www.whybother.org.uk](http://www.whybother.org.uk)

A Macmillan website aimed at helping children and young adults learn more about cancer.

### Winston's Wish

Telephone: **0845 203 0405**

Website: [www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

Publications and support for children who are affected by serious illness or bereavement in the family.

## Other resources

### *No You Don't Know How We Feel* DVD (27 minutes)

Children and young people facing the serious illness of a parent talk about their experiences. Available from your local cancer information and support centre or contact Gillian Chowns at [gpatgc@aol.com](mailto:gpatgc@aol.com)

## Further support

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If you have any concerns about sharing information with your child's school, you can talk to your breast care nurse. They may also know of any relevant services available in your area. You may find it helpful to talk to someone who has had a similar experience to you. You can do this one to one or in a support group. For more information on individual support or support groups in your areas, call our Helpline on **0808 800 6000** (Text Relay **18001**) or see the breast cancer services map on our website at [www.breastcancercare.org.uk/map](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk/map)

### Breast Cancer Care

From diagnosis, throughout treatment and beyond, our services are here every step of the way. Here is an overview of all the services we offer to people living with and beyond breast cancer.

Our free, confidential **Helpline** is here for anyone who has questions about breast cancer or breast health. Your call will be answered by one of our nurses or trained staff members with experience of breast cancer.

Our **website** gives instant access to information when you need it. It's also home to the largest online breast cancer community in the UK, so you can share your questions or concerns with other people in a similar situation.

Through our professionally-hosted **Discussion Forums** you can exchange tips on coping with the side effects of treatment, ask questions, share experiences and talk through concerns online. If you're feeling anxious or just need to hear from someone else who's been there, this is a way to gain support and reassurance from others in a similar situation to you.

Our **One-to-One Support** service can put you in touch with someone who knows what you're going through. Just tell us what you'd like to talk about and we can find someone who's right for you.

We host weekly **Live Chat** sessions on our website offering you a private space to discuss your concerns with others – getting instant responses to messages and talking about issues that are important to you.

If you find it difficult to talk about breast cancer, we can answer your questions by email instead – our **Ask the Nurse** service is available on the website.

We run **Moving Forward Information and Support Sessions** for people living with and beyond breast cancer. These sessions cover a range of topics including adjusting and adapting after a breast cancer diagnosis, exercise and keeping well, and menopause. In addition, we offer **Lingerie Evenings** where you can learn more about choosing a bra after surgery.

We also offer a **HeadStrong** service where you can find alternatives to a wig and meet other people who understand the distress of losing your hair. Our **Younger Women's Forums**, **Living with Secondary Breast Cancer** courses and **Seca Support Groups** for people with secondary breast cancer are also here to offer specific, tailored support.

Our free **Information Resources** for anyone affected by breast cancer include factsheets, booklets and DVDs. You can order our publications by using our order form, which can be requested from the Helpline. All our publications can also be downloaded or ordered from our website.

To request a free leaflet containing further information about our services for people recently diagnosed with breast cancer please contact your nearest centre (contact details at the back).

## Other organisations

### Cancer Talk

Website: [www.cancertalk.org.uk](http://www.cancertalk.org.uk)

A Macmillan funded webpage specifically aimed at providing information and support for teachers supporting children affected by cancer.

### Macmillian Cancer Support

Macmillan Cancer Support  
89 Albert Embankment  
London SE1 7UQ

General enquiries: **020 7840 7840**

Helpline: **0808 808 0000**

Website: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

Textphone: **0808 808 0121** or **Text Relay**

Macmillan Cancer Support provides practical, medical, emotional and financial support to people living with cancer and their carers and families. Over the phone, its cancer support specialists can answer questions about cancer types and treatments, provide practical and financial support to help people live with cancer. Its website features expert, high-quality information on cancer types and treatments, emotional, financial and practical help, and an online community where people can share information and support. Macmillan also funds expert health and social care professionals such as nurses, doctors and benefits advisers.

### Riprap

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### Notes

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## Notes

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This factsheet can be downloaded from our website, [www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk)

It is also available in large print, Braille or on audio CD on request by phoning **0845 092 0808**.

**This factsheet has been written by Nikki Morris, produced by Breast Cancer Care's clinical specialists and reviewed by healthcare professionals and people affected by breast cancer.**

### Centres

#### London and the South East of England

Telephone 0845 077 1895

Email [src@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:src@breastcancercare.org.uk)

#### Wales, South West and Central England

Telephone 0845 077 1894

Email [cym@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:cym@breastcancercare.org.uk)

#### East Midlands and the North of England

Telephone 0845 077 1893

Email [nrc@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:nrc@breastcancercare.org.uk)

#### Scotland and Northern Ireland

Telephone 0845 077 1892

Email [sco@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:sco@breastcancercare.org.uk)

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**Please send your cheque/PO/CAF voucher to Breast Cancer Care, FREEPOST RRRKZ-ARZY-YCKG, 5-13 Great Suffolk Street, London SE1 0NS**

Or to make a donation online using a credit or debit card, please visit [www.breastcancercare.org.uk/donate-to-us](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk/donate-to-us)

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Breast Cancer Care is here for anyone affected by breast cancer. We bring people together, provide information and support, and campaign for improved standards of care. We use our understanding of people's experience of breast cancer and our clinical expertise in everything we do.

Visit [www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk) or call our free Helpline on **0808 800 6000** (Text Relay **18001**).

Interpreters are available in any language. Calls may be monitored for training purposes. Confidentiality is maintained between callers and Breast Cancer Care.

### Central Office

#### Breast Cancer Care

5–13 Great Suffolk Street

London SE1 0NS

Telephone 0845 092 0800

Fax 0845 092 0820

Email [info@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:info@breastcancercare.org.uk)

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