

# Breast cancer and your child's school



This booklet is to help you communicate with your child's school after a diagnosis of breast cancer, so that your family is well supported.





## **This information is by Breast Cancer Care.**

**We are the only specialist UK-wide charity that supports people affected by breast cancer. We've been supporting them, their family and friends and campaigning on their behalf since 1973.**

Today, we continue to offer reliable information and personal support, over the phone and online, from nurses and people who've been there. We also offer local support across the UK.

From the moment you notice something isn't right, through to treatment and beyond, we're here to help you feel more in control.

For breast cancer care, support and information, call us free on **0808 800 6000** or visit **[breastcancercare.org.uk](https://breastcancercare.org.uk)**



## Your relationship with your child's school will be important after your breast cancer diagnosis and during treatment.

This booklet includes a tear-out section that you can use to give the school information about your diagnosis and treatment, and the type of support you and your child may need.

In this booklet we talk about schools, but it may also be appropriate if your child attends nursery.

You may find it helpful to read our booklet **Talking with your children about breast cancer**. Our children's book **Mummy's Lump** helps explain breast cancer to children under seven years.

## Why should I tell my child's school?

Just as you'll experience a range of emotions after your diagnosis and through treatment, your child will also have a variety of feelings. They may not tell you they're worried, but fear and uncertainty can affect their behaviour (in and out of school), school work and friendships. School is an important part of your child's life and the teachers and other children can help provide stability and support at a time of change at home.

Interacting with your child's school may feel daunting, but by working with the school you'll enable staff to plan and provide the help and support you'd prefer.

## When should I tell my child's school?

It's helpful for your child's school to know as soon as possible about your diagnosis. This is so staff can fully support you and your child at this difficult time. You may prefer to let your partner, another family member or a friend speak to the school on your behalf.

## Who should I tell?

You can tell the head teacher, your child's form/class teacher or another teacher you feel able to talk to. Some schools have a member of staff who oversees pastoral care or a school nurse who you may want to approach. Face-to-face contact with a member of school staff may be best, but if that's not possible you could make initial contact through a telephone call, letter or email.

Young children sometimes want their class to be informed, while older children often want as few people as possible to know. Check what works best for you and your child, and let them know who you're telling and why.

## What should I tell them?

As well as your diagnosis, you may want to tell the school about any treatment planned and any change in practical arrangements. Be clear about what your child knows. It's useful to tell the school the wording you use when talking with your child about your cancer.

One of the most difficult things for many adults is using the word cancer because many people are fearful of cancer. This is not necessarily true for children, who may simply accept it as the name for what's wrong with you. They may have overheard this word used in the family or at school anyway. If you can, it's best to use the word cancer from the beginning, and to explain it using language your children understand.

Remember, you can share as much or as little as you choose. You don't need to tell the school staff everything you know, unless you want to. You might find the tear-out section for schools in this leaflet helpful.

## How can I help my child talk with people at school?

Your child may want to tell other people about your cancer, or they may not want to discuss it at all. Other children may ask them questions about your cancer. It can be helpful to speak to your child about how they might talk to other people. You could discuss the words they might use and explain they need only tell people as much as they want. If your child is worried or frightened, you might want to ask them who they feel comfortable talking to at school, so you can let the school know. Your child can also talk to other support organisations (we've listed some on page 11).

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

Think about what support you'd like from the school and be clear when asking for it. Teachers often won't know how to help unless you tell them.

The following can be helpful to consider.

- Agree with the school who you can speak to throughout your treatment (called a link person or link people).
- Confirm a telephone number and email address on which to contact them directly.
- Agree with the link people which other members of staff they tell and what information they share.
- Decide how they can tell you important information about your child's wellbeing – for example if your child has had a 'sad day'.
- Sometimes appointments overrun and you may not be able to collect your child from school on time. Arrange who to speak to and how to contact them if this happens.
- 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 any family issues that could affect 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 use the same language and avoid using words your child doesn't 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 is 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.
- If you're a single parent or guardian and your child is your carer – in anything from a minor to a very major role – let your child's school know so they can support your child.

## Information for my child's school about my breast cancer diagnosis

This form has been taken from Breast Cancer Care's booklet **Breast cancer and your child's school**.

The form is for parents to give to their child's school. It contains information about their diagnosis, treatment and the support they and their child may need. There's also a summary of breast cancer treatments.

When a child at your school has a parent or guardian with breast cancer, this will often affect the practical details of their school life. It's also likely to have an emotional impact on the person diagnosed and those around them. The parent or guardian and their child may need your support during the course of their treatment.

The information in this form is private and confidential.

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

I'm 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

The treatment is due to start on: \_\_\_\_\_

I've told my child the following information:

---

---

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 **Talking with your children about breast cancer** booklet for the school staff.

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: \_\_\_\_\_

(relationship to me: \_\_\_\_\_)

## How the school might support my child and me

Breast Cancer Care has highlighted some issues you may wish to consider when supporting my child. I've ticked the things that are important to me.

- Receiving and returning information may not be as efficient as usual – please remind me if I don't respond in the time period required.
- Ensuring my child has the right equipment each day for school can be difficult at times – please make allowances for my child and let me know if this is a problem.
- Delivering or collecting my child at school may cause me anxiety – can I deliver or collect them from a different place or early?
- I may not be able to walk as far as usual. Can I park closer to school?
- Due to my cancer diagnosis we've had a change in financial circumstances – can I discuss with you financial support for school dinners, extracurricular activities, school trips or school fees?
- It's difficult for me to arrive early for school events. Could I have a seat reserved for me?
- Is anyone at school able to help my child with some of their homework?
- It's more difficult for our family to do things outside school. I'd like to request priority access to after school clubs or trips for my child.
- My child may need extra emotional support during school trips, residential trips or free time.
- My child may find it difficult if cancer is discussed in school. Please let me know of any plans for assemblies, lessons or charity events connected to cancer so I can talk to my child beforehand.
- My child is preparing for exams. Can you give any additional support to my child with their preparation or taking their exams? For example, can you 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 to support services without my agreement.
- My immunity is lowered with chemotherapy, which means I'm more likely to get infections. If possible, 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?

# Breast cancer treatments

Find out more information at [breastcancercare.org.uk](https://www.breastcancercare.org.uk)

## Surgery

Surgery is the first treatment for most women with breast cancer. Breast-conserving surgery is the removal of the cancer with a margin (border) of normal healthy breast tissue around it. A mastectomy is removal of all the breast tissue including the skin and nipple area.

## Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy is given to some people either before or after surgery to destroy any cancer cells that may have spread from the breast to other parts of the body. It can be given over a period of several months. Common side effects include feeling sick, an increased risk of infections, hair loss or thinning, fatigue (extreme tiredness) and hot flushes.

## Radiotherapy

Radiotherapy uses high energy x-rays to destroy any cancer cells left behind in the breast area after surgery or chemotherapy. Some people have radiotherapy five days a week for three weeks, although this can vary. The most common side effects include fatigue and skin damage.

## Hormone (endocrine) therapies

There are several different types of hormone therapy drugs, which are usually taken over several years. Side effects include hot flushes and painful joints.

## Targeted cancer therapies

These drugs block the growth and spread of cancer. The most widely used is trastuzumab (Herceptin), which is usually given every three weeks over a year. Side effects include flu-like symptoms and feeling sick.

## After treatment

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

## Secondary breast cancer

Secondary breast cancer occurs when cancer cells from the breast have spread to other parts of the body such as the bones, lungs, liver or brain. The cancer can be treated but it can't be cured. Treatment aims to control and slow down the spread of the disease, relieve symptoms and give the person the best possible quality of life.

## Further support

### Breast Cancer Care

Breast Cancer Care has several publications you might find helpful, including:

- **Mummy's Lump** – a picture book for young children
- **Talking with your children about breast cancer**
- **Medikidz explain breast cancer** – for children and teenagers aged 8–15

You can order or download copies from our website [breastcancercare.org.uk](http://breastcancercare.org.uk) or call our Helpline on **0808 800 6000** for more information.

### Other organisations

#### ChildLine

[childline.org.uk](http://childline.org.uk)

Telephone: 0800 1111

A counselling service for children and young people.

#### Get Connected

[getconnected.org.uk](http://getconnected.org.uk)

Telephone: 0808 808 4994

Free, confidential helpline for young people under 25 who need help, but don't know where to turn.

#### Riprap

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

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

#### Winston's Wish

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

Telephone: 0845 203 0405

Offers publications and support for children who are affected by serious illness or bereavement in the family, including a school information pack.

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

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)

### **Macmillan Cancer Support**

**[macmillan.org.uk](http://macmillan.org.uk)**

Provides information for teachers and schools to support children affected by cancer.

### **Cancer in the school community (book)**

Available to download from the Cancer Council New South Wales website [cancercouncil.com.au](http://cancercouncil.com.au). This book contains information to help people respond effectively and sensitively to issues that arise when someone is affected by cancer. Although it's Australian, the content may still be helpful.

### **Partnership for Children**

**[partnershipforchildren.org.uk](http://partnershipforchildren.org.uk)**

Telephone: 020 8974 6004

An independent charity that promotes the mental health and emotional wellbeing of children. It has resources for parents and teachers to help young children cope with difficult situations.







## 4 ways to get support

We hope this information was helpful, but if you have questions, want to talk to someone who knows what it's like or want to read more about breast cancer, here's how you can.



Speak to trained experts, nurses or someone who's had breast cancer and been in your shoes. Call free on **0808 800 6000** (Monday to Friday 9am–5pm and Saturday 9am–1pm).



Chat to other women who understand what you're going through in our friendly community, for support day and night. Look around, share, ask a question or support others at **[forum.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://forum.breastcancercare.org.uk)**



Find trusted information you might need to understand your situation and take control of your diagnosis or order information booklets at **[breastcancercare.org.uk](http://breastcancercare.org.uk)**



See what support we have in your local area. We'll give you the chance to find out more about treatments and side effects as well as meet other people like you. Visit **[breastcancercare.org.uk/in-your-area](http://breastcancercare.org.uk/in-your-area)**

# We're here for you: help us to be there for other people too

If you found this booklet helpful, please use this form to send us a donation. Our information resources and other services are only free because of support from people such as you.

We want to be there for every person facing the emotional and physical trauma of a breast cancer diagnosis. Donate today and together we can ensure that everyone affected by breast cancer has someone to turn to.

## Donate by post

Please accept my donation of **£10/£20/my own choice of £**

I enclose a cheque/PO/CAF voucher made payable to  
**Breast Cancer Care**

## Donate online

You can give using a debit or credit card at  
**[www.breastcancercare.org.uk/donate](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk/donate)**

## My details

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Postcode \_\_\_\_\_

Email address \_\_\_\_\_

We might occasionally want to send you more information about our services and activities

- Please tick if you're happy to receive email from us
- Please tick if you don't want to receive post from us

We won't pass on your details to any other organisation or third parties.

Please return this form to Breast Cancer Care, Freepost RRRKZ-ARZY-YCKG,  
5-13 Great Suffolk Street, London SE1 0NS



# About this booklet

**Breast cancer and your child's school** was written by Breast Cancer Care'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:

Phone **0345 092 0808**

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



You can order or download more copies from **[www.breastcancercare.org.uk/publications](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk/publications)**



For a large print, Braille, DAISY format or audio CD version:

Phone **0345 092 0808**

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



When you have breast cancer, everything changes. At Breast Cancer Care, we understand the emotions, challenges and decisions you face every day, and we know that everyone's experience is different.

For breast cancer care, support and information, call us free on **0808 800 6000** or visit **[breastcancercare.org.uk](https://breastcancercare.org.uk)**

### **Central Office**

Breast Cancer Care  
5–13 Great Suffolk Street  
London SE1 0NS  
Phone: 0345 092 0800  
Email: [info@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:info@breastcancercare.org.uk)

Registered charity in England and Wales 1017658  
Registered charity in Scotland SC038104  
Registered company in England 2447182