

A practical guide to
understanding cancer

ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT CANCER?

**WE ARE
MACMILLAN.
CANCER SUPPORT**

Many people worry about getting cancer, sometimes because a relative has had it.

This leaflet explains:

- **that it is not common for cancer to run in families**
- **what we know about the main causes of cancer**
- **what you can do to reduce your risk of cancer.**



Cancer risk

More than 1 in 3 people in the UK will get cancer during their lives. Everyone has a certain risk of developing cancer. It's thought that this is affected by a combination of our genes, lifestyle and environment.

Most of the time, we don't know exactly what causes any particular cancer. But we do know some of the risk factors for cancer. Risk factors are things that can make you more likely to develop cancer. They include things such as being older, smoking and being overweight.

Some risk factors are very likely to cause cancer. Others only slightly increase the risk of getting it. Usually, cancer is the result of a combination of several risk factors.

Having a particular risk factor doesn't mean that you'll definitely get cancer – just as not having any risk factors doesn't mean you won't.

Smoking is a good example of this. If you smoke, it isn't certain that you will get lung cancer – just as if you don't smoke, it's not certain that you won't. But smoking will greatly increase your risk of getting lung cancer. About 9 out of 10 people who develop lung cancer are smokers.

For most people, increasing age is the biggest risk factor for developing cancer. In general, older people (those over 65) are far more likely to develop cancer than younger people (those under 50).

Cancer is very common. Most of us have relatives who've had cancer. People often worry that a history of cancer in their family greatly increases their risk of developing it. But in fact, fewer than 1 in 10 cancers (5–10%) are associated with a strong family history of cancer.

**Fewer than 1 in 10
cancers are associated
with a strong family
history.**

How does family history affect cancer risk?

Most cancers aren't caused by inherited cancer genes. If one or two of your relatives have had cancer, this doesn't necessarily mean there is a cancer gene in your family.

In general, the more members of your family who have been diagnosed with the same type of cancer, and the younger they were when diagnosed, the more likely it is that there's a family link.

It's only likely that a cancer gene may be present in your family if:

- One of your first-degree relatives has had two different types of cancer (this means they've had two separate cancers, not one cancer that spread somewhere else). First-degree relatives are your parents, children, brothers and sisters.
- Two or more closely related people in your family have had the same type of cancer, or have had types of cancer that are sometimes connected (breast cancer and ovarian cancer are sometimes connected, and so are bowel cancer and womb cancer).
- Members of your family have had cancer at an unusually young age (for example, bowel or breast cancer under the age of 40).

If you're worried about a history of cancer in your family, talk to your GP. They may be able to reassure you or refer you to a clinical genetics service or family cancer clinic.

People with a strong family history of some types of cancer (bowel or breast cancer) are offered earlier or more frequent screening than other people – see page 18 for more information about screening.

There are tests for changes (alterations) in genes that increase the risk of getting breast, ovarian or bowel cancer, as well as some rarer cancers.

If you have a strong family history of one of these cancers, you may be offered a test to check if there is an inherited cancer gene in your family. Genetic testing is normally only possible if you have a relative with one of these cancers who is willing to be tested first.

There's more information about genetic testing in our booklet *Cancer genetics – how cancer sometimes runs in families*.

We also have some leaflets similar to this one that are specifically about breast, bowel, ovarian and prostate cancer. Visit be.macmillan.org.uk or call us on **0808 808 00 00** to order our free resources.

Reducing your risk

Risk factors other than family history often play a more important role in the development of cancer. We know that many cancers could be prevented by lifestyle changes.

Making these changes doesn't guarantee that you won't get cancer, but they will make it less likely and will improve your health generally.

Give up smoking

If you smoke, giving up is the single most important thing you can do for your health.

In the UK, about 1 in 5 cancers (19%) and more than 1 in 4 cancer deaths (about 29%) are caused by smoking. It increases the risk of many cancers including cancers of the mouth, throat, lung, bladder, kidney, pancreas, bowel, stomach and cervix.

Breathing in other people's smoke (passive smoking) also increases your risk of developing cancer.

Smoking is the single biggest avoidable cause of cancer.

Help is available if you want to give up smoking. Ask your GP for advice, or contact your national stop smoking service.

Smokefree (England)

Tel 0800 022 4332

(Mon–Fri, 9am–8pm, Sat–Sun, 11am–4pm)

www.smokefree.nhs.uk

Smokeline (Scotland)

Tel 0800 84 84 84

(Mon–Sun, 8am–10pm)

www.canstopsmoking.com

Stop Smoking Wales

Tel 0800 085 2219

(Mon–Fri, 9am–5pm)

www.stopsmokingwales.com

Smokers' Helpline (Northern Ireland)

Tel 0808 812 8008

(Mon–Fri, 4pm–8pm)

www.want2stop.info

Keep to a healthy weight

The latest figures for the UK estimate that more than half of adults (61%) are overweight.

Being overweight increases the risk of several cancers including cancers of the pancreas, bowel, womb (uterus) and kidney, as well as breast cancer after the menopause. It can also lead to problems such as heart disease, high blood pressure or diabetes.

If you're overweight, getting back to a healthy weight is one of the best ways to reduce your risk of cancer.

Your GP can advise you on the ideal weight for your height. The best way to lose weight is through a combination of eating a balanced diet and being more physically active.

Up to 40% of cancers in the UK could be prevented by lifestyle changes.



Eat a healthy diet

A healthy diet can reduce your risk of cancer, particularly bowel cancer.

You should eat foods high in fibre, such as beans, oatmeal, fruit and vegetables. Aim to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables every day.

Limiting how much red meat, salt and processed meat you eat is also important. Processed meats are meats that have had preservatives added or that have been preserved by salting, curing or smoking. They include sausages, ham and burgers.

Limit how much alcohol you drink

Drinking alcohol, especially drinking more than the recommended limits, increases cancer risk. About 4 in 100 cancers in the UK (4%) are linked to alcohol.

Alcohol especially increases the risk of cancers of the mouth and throat. It is also linked to cancers of the bowel, liver and breast. In general, the more you drink the more your risk increases.

The European Code Against Cancer recommends that to reduce cancer risk, men should drink no more than two units of alcohol a day and women no more than one unit a day.

A unit is half a pint of ordinary strength beer, lager or cider, one small glass (125ml) of wine or a single measure (25ml) of spirits.

Keep physically active

Many studies have found that regular physical activity can reduce the risk of cancer. Lack of physical activity increases the risk of bowel cancer, womb cancer and post-menopausal breast cancer. It may also increase the risk of other cancers, such as lung cancer and prostate cancer.

Being physically active doesn't necessarily mean going to the gym – regular walking, cycling or swimming can be enough.

Try to do at least 2½ hours of moderate-intensity physical activity a week. This could be made up of 30 minutes of activity each day for five days. You could even break it up further into 10 minutes of activity, three times a day.

During moderate-intensity activity, you're still able to talk, but your breathing is quicker and deeper. Your body is warming up, your face may have a healthy glow and your heart is beating faster than normal but not racing.

If you're not used to exercise, your GP can advise you on getting started.

Take care in the sun

Spending some time outside in the sun helps you stay healthy, but it's also important to protect your skin from burning, as this can increase your risk of skin cancers.

Our bodies use the UVB rays in sunlight to make vitamin D, which is important for bone health and reduces the risk of many illnesses, including cancer.



Most people can get enough exposure to UVB rays by going outside regularly, without sunscreen on, for a few minutes during the middle of the day. The amount of sun exposure you need depends on your hair and skin type. But it's important not to stay out long enough to let your skin redden or burn.

If you're going to be out in the sun for longer than a few minutes, use a suncream that protects against both UVA and UVB rays, with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30.

You should wear loose, cotton clothes that cover your body, as well as a hat. Take extra care with children. Avoid using a sun bed or sun lamp. If you want to look tanned, use fake tanning lotions or sprays.

Have safe sex

Viruses play a role in the development of some types of cancer. Generally, these viruses are sexually transmitted, but some of them can also be transmitted through blood (for example, if drug users share a needle).

Human papilloma virus (HPV) plays a role in many cases of cervical cancer, and it also increases the risk of developing head and neck cancer, anal cancer and cancers of the vulva or penis.

Hepatitis B and C can increase the risk of liver cancer, and the HIV (Aids) virus can increase the risk of developing lymphoma and sarcoma, although this is rare.

Know your body

Practising safer sex by using condoms or other barrier methods of contraception, and not sharing needles if you use them, can help protect you from contracting these viruses.

If you know your body and what's normal for you, it will help you to be aware of any changes.

People (particularly older people) sometimes think a change in their body isn't worth bothering their doctor about. But if you notice a change in how you feel or how your body works, and you're not sure why it's happened, it's better to be safe and get it checked out.

You should go to see your doctor if you have:

- a lump anywhere on your body
- a sore or ulcer that doesn't heal within a few weeks
- a mole that changes shape, size or colour, or bleeds
- a cough or hoarse voice that lasts for more than three weeks
- shortness of breath
- loss of appetite, ongoing indigestion or difficulty swallowing

- a change in bowel habit that lasts for more than two weeks
- blood in your urine, bowel motions, spit or vomit, or abnormal bleeding from your vagina
- unexplained weight loss or tiredness
- an unexplained ache or pain that last for more than four weeks.*

Most of the time these changes aren't due to cancer. But if you do develop cancer, finding it early can make a big difference to how successful treatment is.

*Source: The European Code Against Cancer

See your GP if you have any unexplained or ongoing changes in your body.

Cancer screening

Screening tests aim to detect cancer early, when treatment is most effective.

In the UK, there are screening programmes for bowel cancer, breast cancer and cervical cancer. If you're registered with a GP, you should automatically be invited to screening when you reach the age each screening programme starts.

Finding cancer early can make a big difference to the success of treatment.

There's more information about the screening programmes on these websites:

www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk (England)

www.nhsinform.co.uk/screening (Scotland)

www.screening.nhs.uk/wales (Wales)

www.cancerscreening.hscni.net
(Northern Ireland)

If you are still worried

A common reaction to serious illness in the family, or to bereavement, is to feel more vulnerable to the same disease. If you can't stop worrying, you may find it helpful to speak to a counsellor. You can ask your GP for details of a local counselling service, or call our cancer support specialists on **0808 808 00 00**.

The mental health charity MIND has a leaflet called *How to Stop Worrying* – order a copy from mind.org.uk or by calling **0300 123 3393**.

Further resources

We have more information on cancer types, tests, treatments, and living with and after cancer. We also have details of other helpful organisations and support groups in your area.

Get in touch

Macmillan Cancer Support

89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7UQ

Questions about cancer? Call free on 0808 808 00 00 (Mon–Fri, 9am–8pm)

Hard of hearing? Use textphone 0808 808 0121, or Text Relay.

Non-English speaker?

Interpreters are available.

www.macmillan.org.uk

Related Macmillan resources

You may want to order some of the other publications mentioned in this leaflet:

- *Are you worried about bowel cancer?*
- *Are you worried about breast cancer?*
- *Are you worried about ovarian cancer?*
- *Are you worried about prostate cancer?*
- *Cancer genetics – how cancer sometimes runs in families*

To order a booklet, visit be.macmillan.org.uk or call **0808 808 00 00**. All of our information is also available online at macmillan.org.uk/cancerinformation

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Thanks

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Sources

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Can you do something to help?

We hope this leaflet has been useful to you. It's just one of our many publications that are available free to anyone affected by cancer. They're produced by our cancer information specialists who, along with our nurses, benefits advisers, campaigners and volunteers, are part of the Macmillan team. When people are facing the toughest fight of their lives, we're there to support them every step of the way.

We want to make sure no one has to go through cancer alone, so we need more people to help us. When the time is right for you, here are some ways in which you can become a part of our team.



Share your cancer experience

Support people living with cancer by telling your story, online, in the media or face to face.

Campaign for change

We need your help to make sure everyone gets the right support. Take an action, big or small, for better cancer care.

Help someone in your community

A lift to an appointment. Help with the shopping. Or just a cup of tea and a chat. Could you lend a hand?

Raise money

Whatever you like doing you can raise money to help. Take part in one of our events or create your own.

Give money

Big or small, every penny helps. To make a one-off donation see over.

Call us to find out more

0300 1000 200

macmillan.org.uk/getinvolved

Please fill in your personal details

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Other _____

Name _____

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Please accept my gift of £ _____

(Please delete as appropriate)

I enclose a cheque / postal order /
Charity Voucher made payable to
Macmillan Cancer Support

OR debit my:

Visa / MasterCard / CAF Charity
Card / Switch / Maestro

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Signature _____

Date / / _____

Don't let the taxman keep your money

Do you pay tax? If so, your gift will be worth 25% more to us – at no extra cost to you. All you have to do is tick the box below, and the tax office will give 25p for every pound you give.

- I am a UK taxpayer and I would like Macmillan Cancer Support to treat all donations I have made for the four years prior to this year, and all donations I make in the future, as Gift Aid donations, until I notify you otherwise.

I confirm I have paid or will pay an amount of Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax in each tax year, that is at least equal to the tax that Charities & CASCs I donate to will reclaim on my gifts. I understand that other taxes such as VAT and Council Tax do not qualify and that Macmillan Cancer Support will reclaim 25p of tax on every £1 that I give.

Macmillan Cancer Support and our trading companies would like to hold your details in order to contact you about our fundraising, campaigning and services for people affected by cancer. If you would prefer us not to use your details in this way please tick this box.

In order to carry out our work we may need to pass your details to agents or partners who act on our behalf.



If you'd rather donate online go to macmillan.org.uk/donate

Please cut out this form and return it in an envelope (no stamp required) to:
Supporter Donations, Macmillan Cancer Support, FREEPOST LON15851,
89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7UQ

More than one in three of us will get cancer. For most of us it will be the toughest fight we ever face. And the feelings of isolation and loneliness that so many people experience make it even harder. But you don't have to go through it alone. The Macmillan team is with you every step of the way.

We are the nurses and therapists helping you through treatment. The experts on the end of the phone. The advisers telling you which benefits you're entitled to. The volunteers giving you a hand with the everyday things. The campaigners improving cancer care. The community there for you online, any time. The supporters who make it all possible.

Together, we are all Macmillan Cancer Support.

For cancer support every step of the way, call Macmillan on 0808 808 00 00 (Mon–Fri, 9am–8pm) or visit macmillan.org.uk

Hard of hearing? Use textphone 0808 808 0121, or Text Relay.
Non-English speaker? Interpreters available.
Braille and large print versions on request.

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