

Caring for someone with cancer

For families and friends

A carer is someone who helps a person who is ill or disabled.

Carers are diverse

Carers include partners (husband, wife, girlfriend or boyfriend), parents, sons, daughters, relatives, friends and neighbours. Carers may be young or elderly.

Some carers provide help 24 hours a day. Other carers are relatives or friends who visit for a few hours a week to help.

Some people are happy to be carers and feel very close to the person they are caring for. Other people feel obliged to be a carer and may not feel very close to the person they are caring for.

Some carers have other commitments, such as young children or a demanding job or studies.

When does someone become a carer?

The needs of a person with cancer will vary depending on their age, the stage of their cancer, their cultural and religious background and the type of treatment they are having.

A person may become a carer:

- When the cancer is found early and cure is the aim
- When the cancer is advanced and cure is not possible
- When a cancer comes back years after treatment.

What does being a carer mean?

Caring can be a difficult but very important role.

Caring may involve:

- Helping with cooking meals, shopping, transport and hygiene
- Paying bills, managing bank accounts and looking after tax
- Organising and attending medical appointments
- Liaising between family and friends
- Providing basic health care, including giving medicines
- Providing emotional or spiritual support.

Being a carer can mean regularly facing new challenges. At first, some things may seem too hard to do: for example, a carer may feel uncomfortable talking with doctors or helping with medicines. Over time, most carers say they are surprised at how much they can do. They get satisfaction from realising how much help they can give.

Important skills include knowing how to listen, when to talk and when 'being there' is all that the person with cancer needs. Most carers have these skills without realising it.

Coping with difficulty

Caring can sometimes be very hard. For example, some people believe in curses and think their cancer is 'payback' for something they did. This can make it hard to talk about cancer and its treatment.

Sometimes strong family values and cultural beliefs mean that a person feels burdened with family expectations about their role as the carer.

If you are a carer and are finding it difficult, do the best you can. Ask for help if you have any questions or difficulties.

Take care of yourself too!

People can have many conflicting emotions about being a carer. Common feelings include satisfaction, happiness, loneliness, anxiety, fear, sadness, resentment, guilt, helplessness, frustration and anger.

At times, some carers feel more distress than the person they are caring for. This is a normal reaction to how life changes when a person becomes a carer.

Many carers find it hard to focus on their own feelings. They put all their energy into the person with cancer. Carers also need to take care of their own emotional, physical, spiritual and financial needs.

“I realise that looking after my needs while caring for my husband with cancer is so important; it’s like being on the plane when the safety announcement tells you to put the oxygen mask on yourself first before helping others.” (Carole, 66)

Important reminders

- Ask for help. Most friends and family will want to help but may need you to tell them what they can do

- Accept yourself and accept that you may sometimes make mistakes. You are doing the best job you can
- It is okay to feel angry, to cry and to let people see how you are feeling – even the person you are caring for. You can’t be cheerful all the time
- Talk about your feelings with a close friend or relative or a professional counsellor
- Remember – some things you just can’t change!

More information

For information about financial assistance and support services, contact:

- Carers Victoria: 1800 242 636 - the Carers Advice Line provides information and support for people caring for people with illness and disability
- Centrelink: 13 27 17 – the Centrelink Multilingual Service is on 13 12 02. You may be able to get financial assistance such as a carer payment or concession cards from Centrelink
- **Multilingual Cancer Information Line** provides callers with information about cancer in their language, call **13 14 50** and ask for the Cancer Council Victoria Helpline to talk confidentially with a cancer nurse with the help of an interpreter.

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