



NAVIGATING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT BREAST CANCER AND RISK OF RECURRENCE

A breast cancer diagnosis and your journey through treatment are life-changing experiences. Whether you are currently going through treatment or in remission, discussing your diagnosis, risk of recurrence, and ongoing care with those around you might feel daunting. This guide is designed to help you navigate these important conversations with clarity and confidence.

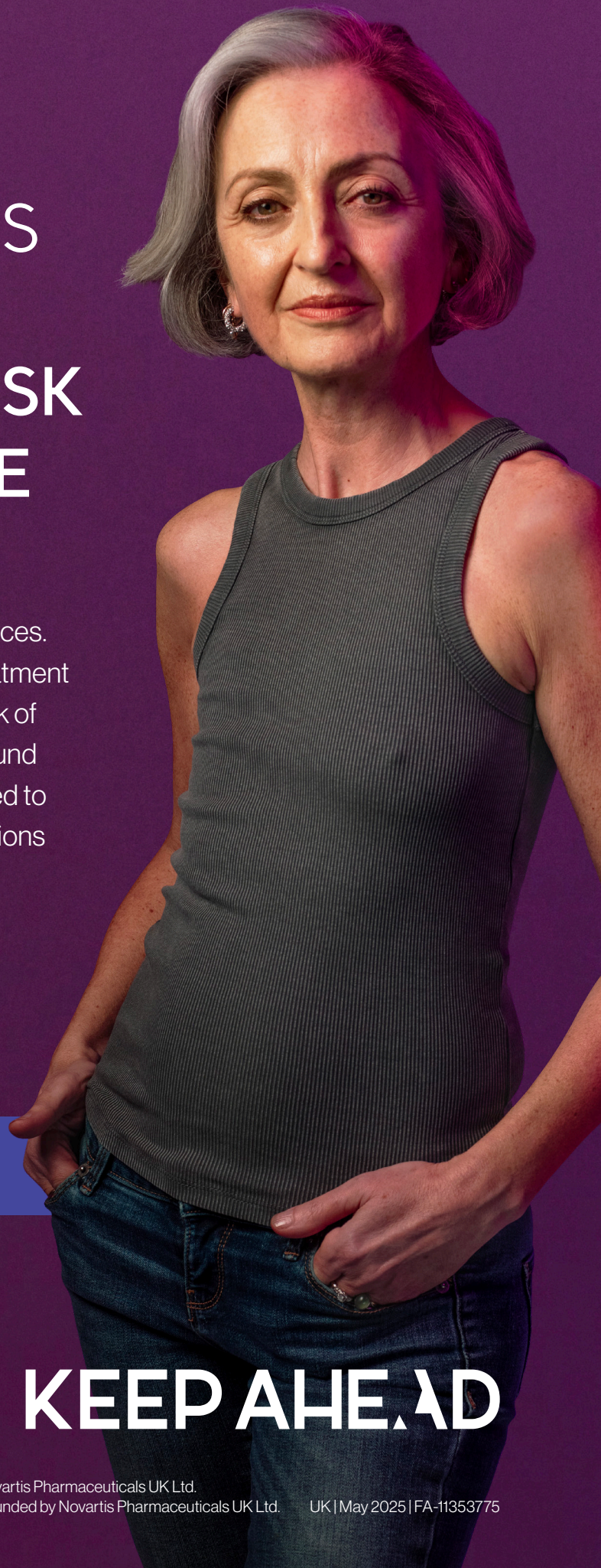
DISCUSSION GUIDE

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KEEP AHEAD

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Keep Ahead is a disease awareness campaign that has been developed and funded by Novartis Pharmaceuticals UK Ltd.

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STEPS TO TAKE AND PRACTICAL TIPS FOR GETTING READY TO TALK

Before discussing your diagnosis with others, you should consider who you want to tell, how much you're willing to share and how and when you want to tell them. Consider the following steps to prepare:

Make your goals clear

Determine what you want to achieve from the conversation. Do you need emotional support, understanding, or help with specific aspects of your care? Do you just need an ear to listen?

Tell them in a way that's best for you

Not everybody wants to have this conversation face to face as it can be quite emotional. Instead, you might want to do it via a phone call, a text or an email to begin with. By starting the conversation in a way that you feel most comfortable, you may find that you're more at ease with sharing the news.

Do not feel obliged to speak about your cancer

Talking about your breast cancer diagnosis is a personal choice, and you should never feel pressured to discuss it if you're not comfortable. It's okay to set boundaries and decide when and where you want to talk about it.

Educate yourself

Understanding your condition and treatment plan can help you answer questions confidently and alleviate any concerns you may have about a particular topic. Discussions with your cancer care team and prior research can help you here.

Be patient with yourself

These conversations can be difficult. If a discussion doesn't go as planned, give yourself time to process and try again whenever you feel ready. Remember that this can be a highly charged conversation, so giving yourself time to recover between conversations can help you realign.

Seek professional guidance

A doctor, therapist, or oncology social worker can provide additional communication strategies and emotional support.



SPEAKING TO YOUR PARTNER ABOUT YOUR CANCER DIAGNOSIS

Discussing your cancer diagnosis with your partner is an emotional and sensitive topic, but it can help strengthen your relationship by giving you both a chance to offer each other support.

When you're ready to talk, try to choose a moment when you both have the time to focus on each other. It's okay to let your partner know any uncertainties or fear you are experiencing, and it's also natural for your partner to experience these feelings too. Here's how you can approach this conversation with understanding and care:

Acknowledge their emotions

Your partner may feel fear, sadness, uncertainty or they may even feel numb. Allow them to express their feelings while reassuring them with facts and information you have gathered about your risk.

Emphasise your treatment plan

Explain how following your doctor's recommendations, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and attending regular check-ups can reduce your risk. Your partner may even offer to help you in these steps.

Discuss your needs

Whether it's emotional support, assistance with medical appointments, or help maintaining a balanced lifestyle, let your partner know what you need from them.

Reaffirm your relationship

Cancer can place strain on relationships, both **physically** and **emotionally**. It is important to remind each other of the love and support you can provide each other as you take the next steps.

TALKING TO WIDER FAMILY

Be open and honest

It's natural to feel a little apprehensive about your family's reactions and the emotional impact these conversations might have on those involved. However, open and honest communication can help you to receive the support you need during this time.

Deciding who to tell

It can be difficult deciding who to tell and when to tell them. You should consider who you want to tell and who might offer their support to you during this time, whether that is emotional or practical support.

Choosing how to tell them

Not everybody is comfortable with a face-to-face conversation about this subject. It can feel overwhelming and that is perfectly normal. Sometimes a face-to-face conversation isn't feasible due to some family members living abroad, for example. You may initially want a close friend or family member to compose a message for you, so you don't have to be the one to tell the wider family. However you want to go about the conversation is ultimately up to you, but it can help to ask someone close to you for advice.

You should consider who you want to tell and who might offer their support to you during this time...

Consider the following methods of communication:



Phone calls

Speaking over the phone allows for immediate, personal interaction without the pressure of meeting in person.



Written communication

Writing letters or emails gives you the time to express all your thoughts clearly and allows recipients time to process the information before replying.



Group chats

Creating a private group message or using a private social media channel allows you to inform multiple people at once. You can use admin controls to allow replies, or you can disable them if you would prefer further discussions in private.

Preparing for conversations

Before reaching out, it's helpful to plan what you want to say and anticipate possible reactions. You should focus on getting across the key points and decide how much detail you are willing to share.

Prepare yourself for questions, and if you don't have all the answers, they will understand. Don't forget, setting boundaries about certain topics that you might not want to discuss can help keep the conversation and emotions controlled. You might find people are very willing to offer their help in any way they can, whether that is checking in regularly, or even providing useful resources they have found online.



TELLING YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT YOUR BREAST CANCER

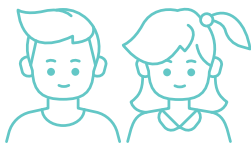
Talking to children about breast cancer can be a tough subject to approach. While you may want to protect them from worry, open and honest communication can help them feel more secure and better equipped to process their feelings. Every child is different, so tailoring your approach to their age, maturity level, and emotional needs is important.



Young children

Young children have a limited understanding of illness and may struggle to grasp what cancer means. It's important to keep explanations simple and focus on providing comfort and reassurance. They may have questions about how it will affect their daily life and need to feel safe and supported.

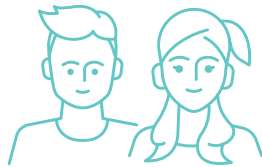
- ✓ Use clear and simple language that they are likely to understand.
- ✓ Provide only the essential facts without overwhelming them.
- ✓ Reassure them that they are safe and not responsible for the illness.
- ✓ Be prepared to repeat information as they process it over time.
- ✓ Use play or creative activities to help them express their feelings.



School-aged children

School-aged children are likely to be more aware of illness and may understand that cancer is serious. They are likely to ask more questions and may need clearer answers. It's important to give them enough information without causing fear and to create a safe space for them to share their feelings.

- ✓ Give your child more detailed, but still age-appropriate information.
- ✓ Explain the basics of cancer and treatments in simple terms.
- ✓ Encourage your child to ask questions and express their feelings.
- ✓ Be honest about changes they might notice, such as physical side effects.
- ✓ Provide reassurance while maintaining honesty.



Teenagers

Teenagers will likely have a more mature understanding of illness and may want more detailed information about your diagnosis and treatment. They might experience a wide range of emotions, including anger and fear. Respecting their need for independence while offering support is key.

- ✓ Share detailed and accurate information about the diagnosis and treatment.
- ✓ Acknowledge and validate difficult emotions.
- ✓ Involve them in discussions and decision-making where appropriate.
- ✓ Invite them to help you research available treatment options.
- ✓ Encourage them to ask questions and express how they feel.
- ✓ Respect their need for space and independence.

Every child is different, so tailoring your approach to their age, maturity level, and emotional needs is important.



Reassure them

- Children often worry about losing a parent or changes to their daily lives. Reassure them that you are taking care of yourself and that there are many steps you and your doctors are taking to prevent recurrence.
- Let them know they can always ask questions and talk about their feelings. Saying, "You don't have to be scared alone. I'm here to answer any questions, and we can talk whenever you need to," can be very comforting.
- Reassure your child that they are handling big changes very well.

Encourage questions

- Give children space to express their emotions, even if they are upset or confused. Let them know that their feelings are normal.
- If they ask difficult questions, it's okay to say that you don't know, and you can find the answers together. This approach helps build trust and keeps the conversation open.
- If a teenager is hesitant to talk, offer other ways to communicate, like writing in a journal or talking to a trusted friend or family member.

Maintain routines

- Keeping a sense of normalcy can help children feel secure. Continue family routines, such as mealtimes, bedtime rituals, and weekend activities.
- Let them know that even though you are managing your health, they can still enjoy their childhood and focus on school, friends, and hobbies.

Offer ongoing support

- Remind your children that they are not alone. Let them know they can always come to you, another family member, a teacher, or a school counsellor if they have concerns.
- If your child or teen is struggling with anxiety or sadness, consider seeking professional support from a counsellor, therapist, or a support group for children of parents with cancer.

CAREGIVER INVOLVEMENT

Caregiver Involvement

Caregivers play a crucial role in providing both practical and emotional support during a cancer diagnosis and treatment. Whether it's your partner, a family member or a close friend, having someone you trust by your side can make a big difference. Open communication with your caregiver can help them support you in the way that works best for you.

You can ask your caregiver to:

1 Attend appointments with you

Having someone with you at medical appointments can help ease anxiety and ensure you don't miss any important information. A caregiver can act as an extra set of ears and help you feel more supported.

2 Ask questions you don't feel comfortable asking

It can be hard to remember everything you want to ask and feel confident enough to ask questions during a medical appointment. Having a caregiver with you can make it easier to get the information you need, especially if you bring notes along with you.

3 Provide emotional and practical support

Caregivers provide more than just medical support. They can play a crucial role in **supporting you emotionally**, providing **strength** and **stability** at an uneasy time in your life. Knowing how to communicate your needs can help them support you more effectively. They are there to support you, so you should let them know how best they can do that. It's important to set boundaries and maintain a degree of independence where you can. An honest, open discussion about this with your caregiver can ensure you strike a good balance between independence and receiving support.



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SPEAKING TO YOUR WORKPLACE ABOUT YOUR BREAST CANCER DIAGNOSIS

Balancing work and post-cancer treatment can be challenging. Whether you need accommodations or simply want your employer to be aware of your health journey, consider these steps:

Find a suitable time and place

You should ask for the conversation to be private and not feel rushed. If possible, try to find a time in both of your schedules that allows them to dedicate additional time and focus to support you in having this conversation. Try to avoid times just before stressful meetings (internal or external), lunchtimes or last thing in the day. This should allow for the conversation to be more relaxed and supportive towards this subject.

Know your rights

Research workplace policies and legal protections related to medical leave, accommodations, and discrimination. Discussing these might be equally useful to your line manager or HR professional, providing them with tangible ways to support you within the workplace.

Decide how much to share

You are not obligated to disclose your diagnosis or provide detailed information about your treatment. Simply stating that you are following a medical plan and may require flexibility can be enough. How much you decide to share is up to you. Are you comfortable sharing additional information to help you with longer term conversations?

Reference:

1. Breast Cancer Now. Work and breast cancer. Available from: https://breastcancernow.org/about-breast-cancer/life-after-treatment/work-and-breast-cancer/?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiA74G9BhAEEiwA8kNfpSjAJEpOxW5pGCtkVT8qM6MXqxlLuqSZEJHAIU3jll0AO5DBaHUpxoCW4gQAvD_BwE [Accessed: May 2025]

Talk to HR or a trusted supervisor

Schedule a private meeting to discuss any needs or requirements, such as flexible hours or remote working options. Depending on your job responsibilities, flexible working may enable you to align your role with your treatment schedule and symptoms.

Plan for potential changes

If your energy levels fluctuate due to post-treatment care, discuss possible workload adjustments with your employer.

Set professional boundaries

Your health is a priority. Advocate for yourself and communicate openly about your capabilities and limits.

Disability Act 2010

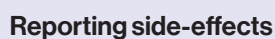
For the purposes of the Equality Act 2010 anyone who has or has had breast cancer is classed as disabled. This protects employees in England, Scotland and Wales from being discriminated against because of their disability.

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 protects people living in Northern Ireland.

You cannot lose your job or be treated less favourably for having breast cancer.¹

Schedule a private meeting to discuss any needs or requirements, such as flexible hours or remote working options.

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