



Caring for a loved one with **secondary breast cancer**

Caring for a loved one

While caring for a loved one can be very rewarding and meaningful, it can also be challenging and stressful. You may find yourself struggling to adapt to your new caregiving role. Perhaps you are now caring for a parent while raising your own children.

Not only are you juggling many responsibilities, but you are also taking care of someone who used to take care of you. Maybe you are caring for a spouse who is becoming more dependent and demanding. The relationship may no longer feel as equal as it once did. Either way, it is common to feel angry and resentful – and exhausted, both physically and emotionally. This guide can help you manage your caregiving role and look after yourself at the same time.



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UK | August 2025 | 138849-2

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Supporting a loved one with secondary breast cancer

If you are a caregiver to someone who is living with secondary breast cancer (SBC), there are many ways you can help. But keep in mind that your loved one may find it difficult to ask for help. Try asking your loved one what would be most helpful for them. Perhaps say, **“What can I do to help you today?”** or **“What can I do right now to relieve a little bit of stress?”** Consider suggesting specific tasks you can do, even if you are not sure they will help: **“What do you want me to make for dinner tonight?”** or **“What errands can I run for you?”** That way, it can take the pressure off your loved one to make decisions and shows that you are there to support them.

Types of support

There are many ways you can support your loved one, and the type of help will depend on what your loved one needs at any point in time. The support you provide can be either practical or emotional. Practical support is often about “doing”, and emotional support is more about “being”. Some examples of each are outlined below.

Practical Support

Practical support means helping in an active way. This could include helping out around the house, such as buying groceries, making dinner, or doing the laundry. Practical support also includes helping your loved one to take their treatment as prescribed.

Appointment support

An important role of a caregiver is to be an advocate for their loved one with the healthcare team.

Here are some ways you can do that:

- Make sure you know ahead of time if there are any updated office procedures or guidelines.
- Bring copies of their lab and pathology reports and imaging scans to each appointment.
- Help them write down a list of questions before appointments. Help make sure the questions are asked and answered.
- Take notes during appointments. This will allow your loved one to listen more closely while you’re writing. You can review the notes together after the appointment.
- If you cannot attend the visit in person, ask if you can join via video or telephone call.
- Be an active participant in the appointment by speaking up and asking questions.

Treatment Support

As a caregiver, you may be responsible for managing your loved one's medication. This might be due to the fatigue that can be associated with particular treatments, reduced mobility due to the disease or because the cancer has spread to the brain which could have an impact on your loved one's memory retention.

These responsibilities can include filling or refilling prescriptions, making sure your loved one takes their medication as prescribed and communicating with the healthcare team about any side effects experienced. This can become overwhelming, especially at the beginning, so we have provided some tips below to make managing your loved one's treatment a little bit easier:

Managing your loved one's treatment

- Create a medication schedule to help your loved one remember what to take, how to take it, and when to take it. This can be a chart, an electronic pill box with alarms, or an app.
- Keep a medication log. There are lots of medications your loved one might be prescribed so make sure to include the name of the medication, the purpose, dosage, date started, any side effects* or problems experienced, and the name of the doctor who prescribed the treatment. Include over-the-counter medications, such as supplements and herbal products.
- Keep track of any changes you notice in your loved one's symptoms or mood.
- When picking up a prescription, check to make sure the label has your loved one's name on it and that it includes the correct medication and the right dosage.
- Remind your loved one that the doctor has prescribed the medication for a reason. Explain that treatment may reduce their symptoms and slow the progression of their cancer.

Emotional Support

Sometimes all you need to do is listen and be present. Let your loved one complain, cry, or express anger without judging, cheerleading, or trying to problem-solve. Simply acknowledge their feelings. Being listened to and having the opportunity to voice their feelings can be healing for them.

Your loved one might also enjoy:

- Listening to music together
- Watching a funny movie together
- Playing cards or a board game together
- Visiting other friends and family
- Going for a scenic drive together

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At times, your loved one may want to be alone. Perhaps they are trying to be brave. Maybe they want to have peace and quiet to be alone in their thoughts. Try not to take this personally. Part of staying close is giving them space if they need it. Send them a note letting them know how much you love, admire, and care about them. Remind them that you are there for them.

Look after yourself too

Caring for somebody with secondary breast cancer can be physically and emotionally demanding. Make sure you are looking after yourself and taking time when you need it. Looking after yourself both mentally and physically means you can better look after your loved one.

There is plenty of support available for carers as well as breast cancer patients. You can ask your loved one's healthcare team to arrange counselling for you, or alternatively, there is support for carers online, such as online communities, live chats and phone lines you can call.

*Reporting of side effects If you get any side effects, talk to your doctor, pharmacist or nurse. This includes any possible side effects not listed in the package leaflet. You can also report side effects directly via the Yellow Card Scheme at <https://yellowcard.mhra.gov.uk/>

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