

# CAREGIVERS, FAMILY AND FRIENDS



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Being a caregiver has been described as one of the toughest, but also the most rewarding, challenges. The thought of caring for someone with cancer can be frightening. You may worry that you don't have the skills or emotional strength. But many people who have done it say it can be rewarding and satisfying to help someone when they need it the most.

Caregivers, family and friends can make a huge difference to the quality of life, or even to the survival of the person with cancer.

### BEING A CAREGIVER

- A caregiver is anyone who provides unpaid personal care and support to a person who needs help because of a disability or illness, like cancer.
- Becoming a caregiver can be sudden, or it can happen gradually over time.
  - Caregivers can be connected to a person with cancer in many ways, such as family, marriage, friendship, or other types of relationships.
- When supporting someone with cancer, you can be as involved as you are prepared to be; it may be a weekly cup of coffee, a chat and just listening or it could involve a whole lot more.
- For many people, being a caregiver is a full-time responsibility, usually on top of work, looking after children, or other roles. There are about 2.7 million caregivers in Australia. To learn more about what it means to be a caregiver, visit [Carers Australia](https://www.carersaustralia.org.au/).
- There are no rules about what is involved in caring for someone with cancer. It depends on each person's needs and limitations and what other help and support you may have.

### WHAT IS INVOLVED IN BEING A CAREGIVER?

If you know someone with head and neck cancer you may be wondering what you can do to support them. There are many things you can do to help. They may need ongoing personal and medical care for a long time or just some help while they are having treatment.

**Caring for someone with cancer may involve the following:**

- **Practical help:** In forms such as shopping, cleaning, picking children up from school, or driving to medical appointments.
- **Helping them follow health advice:** Such as having their medicines and looking out for side effects or signs that they are having trouble sticking to health advice, for example smoking or drinking a lot of alcohol.
- **Eating well:** Support the person with cancer meet their diet and nutrition needs, for example choosing foods which are easier to swallow and helping them to maintain their weight. They may receive information from a dietitian, and you can find out more about this on the [Head and Neck Cancer Australia website](#).
- **Organisation:** This may include helping coordinate appointments, deal with medical forms and bills, or getting information about, and applying for financial support.
- **Counselling:** This may be in the form of listening, providing emotional support or looking for signs the person with cancer may not be coping or be depressed and may need professional help.
- **Making decisions:** Sometimes, getting a [second opinion](#) or more information about treatment is necessary. If the person with cancer becomes very ill and is unable to express their wishes you may be the person who makes decisions about their care.
- **Being an advocate:** Help make sure the needs of the person with cancer are met and they get the support they are eligible for.
- **Finding a 'new normal':** By supporting and encouraging them to cope with changes, reconnect to family and friends and possibly go back to work or activities they enjoy.

Treatment for head and neck cancer can be tough for the person physically and can often lead to weight loss and problems swallowing and/or speaking. The patient may also struggle emotionally as they struggle with their own fear and discomfort. The patient may get very ill for a time and may need to totally rely on you. It can be a distressing experience to observe suffering in someone you love and care, and during this time it is important to get advice and support, and to look after yourself.

You may be able to cope better if you have someone outside the family to talk to, like a counsellor or psychologist. Your GP or the cancer care team may be able to help you find someone to talk with or identify a person who you can call on for advice on practical care issues.

## LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Being a caregiver can be hard, both physically and emotionally. It's normal to feel satisfied some days and frustrated, angry or resentful on others. Caregivers can also feel lonely and isolated. The stress of caring for someone with cancer can affect the caregiver's health, so it's important to look after yourself too.

### TIPS FOR LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

- Eat regularly and try to eat three meals during the day, including vegetables, fruit, lean proteins and wholegrains.
- Try to get enough sleep.
- If you take any regular medicines remember to take them and see your doctor if you feel unwell.
- If there are activities you usually do without the person you are caring for, try to keep this up. Even if it means organising someone else to stay with them while you are out. Try to keep doing the things you enjoy, like playing a sport or going to your club or a local group.
- Ask for help from family and friends. Don't try to do everything yourself.
- Talk to others about how you're feeling. You may want to talk to your family and friends or a health professional, such as your doctor or a counsellor.
- Make time to relax. Go for a walk or make a cup of tea and sit outside. Find a place or activity that is not related to your role as a caregiver, so that you have a sanctuary to go to for a set period of time every day. This might be something like going to the gym or swimming pool every day or gardening or perhaps doing a course – just for you.
- It's important to know the signs that you're not coping and talk to someone who can help. Many cancer support groups and education programs are open to caregivers as well, and can be a good way to meet other caregivers and share ways of coping.

## About Head and Neck Cancer Australia

Head and Neck Cancer Australia (formerly Beyond Five) is Australia's only charity dedicated to providing information and support to people living with head and neck cancer, caregivers, family and healthcare professionals.

Head and Neck Cancer Australia's mission is to improve the quality of life of everyone affected by head and neck cancer through education and access to support and to raise awareness of head and neck cancer nationally.

Head and Neck Cancer Australia supports people through their cancer journey, from diagnosis to treatment and life after cancer by providing comprehensive, easy to understand and easy to access information. We have the only Directory of Head and Neck Cancer services and support groups available in Australia and New Zealand helping people to find the right services and support when they need it most.

Phone: 1300 424 848

Email: [contact@headandneckcancer.org.au](mailto:contact@headandneckcancer.org.au)

Web: [www.headandneckcancer.org.au](http://www.headandneckcancer.org.au)

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