

How to Ask for Help

A guide for people affected by cancer

There are times we all need a little support – someone to pick up the kids from school, collect a few groceries, or listen when we need to talk. Being diagnosed with cancer may mean that you need more of that help than usual. This fact sheet has ideas for extra support, including who to ask and what to say.

If you aren't used to asking for help, it may feel awkward asking people to do something for you. But people usually want to help – especially when you are unwell. In fact, not knowing what they can do can leave friends or family feeling helpless.

Ways to organise help

Start with a list, diary or calendar of appointments and needs. Then add in who can help as you go.

To ask for help, you could send a group message, email or social media post to a closed group. Apps like Gather My Crew can also help you get organised.

A friend, neighbour or family member may be able to coordinate help and send updates if you are tired or don't want to talk. This person doesn't need to live close by – they could be interstate or even overseas. Your doctor or social worker may also be able to offer suggestions for how to get help and support.

Things to keep in mind

- Be really clear about exactly what you need and when. For example, a ride to the hospital at 10 am. Give as much notice as possible and a reminder too.
- Saying thank you is enough – no need for gifts. If someone is driving you a long way, you might offer to pay for petrol.
- Stay safe. If you feel uncomfortable, talk to a trusted family member or friend.



What you may need help with

Travel

You may need help getting to appointments (doctors, tests, treatment) and people are often happy to drive you. Your treatment centre or hospital may offer transport services. Try a taxi or rideshare during times when people can't help.



Home help

A neighbour may be able to take out your bin or mow the lawn. You could ask any visitors to help with cleaning, washing up or laundry. Consider a cleaner, laundry or gardening service. Ask a community or social worker about what external home help you may be eligible for.

Making meals

Offers to cook are common, so ask for what's most helpful. That may be school lunches for the kids or easy-to-heat dinners. Explain what you can eat (e.g. soft or light foods). Meal delivery services can cater to specific dietary needs.

Shopping and errands

Have someone collect a bag of groceries or your prescriptions – or order online and have it delivered.



Caring support

You may need child-minding, help with someone you care for (e.g. a parent), or pet-sitting if you're unwell or in hospital.

Regular duties

If you volunteer at a school, charity or club, you could ask someone else to take your place. This can ease the pressure if you are worried about letting anyone down.

Emotional support

A counsellor, social worker or psychologist can help talk through your feelings. It may also be nice for someone to sit with you during treatment, visit you at home, or call or message to check in. Consider making a regular time for these check-ins.



People who may be able to help

Make a list of who can help, their contact details and what they can do (e.g. Jan can drive me to treatment). This list can help a carer, friend or nurse if they need to know who to call (e.g. to collect you from hospital).

Community –

Your neighbours, religious group or local community organisations may offer help (e.g. Senior Club). Support could also come from a club (walking or book club) you are in, or volunteer for. Check with your local council – they may have programs that can help too.



Health organisations – Ask your GP about health services available to you. Your cancer type may have a support group (e.g. Bowel Cancer Australia). Charities or hospitals may offer support (e.g. McGrath Foundation Nurses support all cancer types).

Family – We often rely on one family member, but a partner, child, parent, in-law or cousin may also be able to help. Include people as “back-up” if your carer is away or needs a break. Someone nearby is convenient, but people may come for a visit to help.

Friends – When people hear you have cancer they may say, “Let me know what I can do”. And they usually mean it. As well as people you see often, consider old friends you’d feel comfortable reaching out to. They may like to reconnect and offer support.

Social workers – Your treatment centre or hospital social worker may suggest support services (e.g. home care), as well as offer you counselling.

People you work with – Depending on your workplace, you may feel okay asking a colleague for help (e.g. driving you to work).

Note to reader

Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and is not a substitute for professional medical, legal or financial advice. Information about cancer is constantly being updated and revised by the medical and research communities. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Cancer Council NSW excludes all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided in this fact sheet.

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Things that you could say...

If you feel awkward asking	“I don’t like to ask for help, but I do need some support at the moment. Could you please help me with...”
If you need help with transport	“I am having treatment on Tuesday and don’t have any way to get to the hospital that morning. If you could drive me, I would be very grateful.”
To someone who offered to help	“You asked if you could help me earlier, and now I do have something I need help with... Could you please...” OR “I’d like to take you up on your offer of help. I need...”
When someone asks how you are	“Thanks for asking. I’m finding things a little overwhelming. I really need help with walking the dogs – any chance you could help with that?”
To a friend	“You may not know, but I have some health issues, and I was hoping you could help me with...”
If it’s been a while since you talked	“I know it’s been a while. I hope you are well. I have some health issues I was hoping to talk to you about.”
To a neighbour	“I noticed you putting out the bins. I was hoping you might help me by putting mine out too.”
To someone who helped	“Thank you so much for driving me to the doctor. I appreciate your help.”

Support from Cancer Council



It may help to talk to someone who has been through a similar experience. For support programs (including telephone, online, and peer-to-peer support groups), call 13 11 20. Experienced health professionals can listen to your concerns, provide information, and put you in touch with local services and support groups.



Cancer Council NSW acknowledges Traditional Custodians of Country and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to Elders past and present.

