

A close-up, side-profile shot of a woman with long brown hair, wearing a pink athletic t-shirt and black leggings. She is sitting outdoors on a grassy area, looking towards the right with a slight smile. She is wearing a black smartwatch on her left wrist. The background is a soft-focus green field under bright sunlight.

managing breast cancer

Your guide to proactive care

medibank
For Better Health

“I was caught completely off guard when I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2014. I had no obvious risk factors, and had always been healthy, so I had very little experience in the world I was suddenly navigating.

My medical care was brilliant, but there were practical matters and expenses I was not prepared for and sometimes found overwhelming, especially when I had to stop working. I felt that my health insurer was in a perfect position to offer practical support and information that I would not normally get from my doctors.

When I returned to work last year, I made it my mission to help Medibank provide that kind of personalised support for other people. I am so excited and proud to be launching this new cancer support service for women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer.

We have developed this booklet as part of the programme to provide you with some of the extra insights that I and other women with breast cancer have gleaned, and to answer some of the questions we had. We have also included a resource guide to point you toward some of the excellent services that are available.

We know this can be a very challenging time, but we want you to feel assured that our staff is here to support you and answer your questions on your journey toward better health.”



Naveena Nekkhalapudi

Head of Planning and Performance
(and breast cancer survivor!), Medibank



Naveena Nekkhalapudi (and Laika)

What's inside

Tips and information on:

- Getting the most out of your care
- Coping with stress
- Recovering well
- What to expect after surgery and red flags to watch for
- Managing side effects
- Living well after treatment
- Managing finances
- Understanding your private health insurance
- Useful resources to support your journey



We're here to help

You can ring our Health Advice Line anytime on **1800 644 325** to speak to an experienced nurse about any health related question, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.



Know your cover

If you have any questions about your cover, ring us on **132 331**.

Consult your doctor before making lifestyle changes

This information is designed to complement the advice provided by your doctor. The recommendations are for educational purposes only. They are general in nature and may not always apply to you. Always follow the specific recommendations made by your doctor or other healthcare professionals.

Getting the most out of your care



Be gentle with yourself

There's no right or wrong way to respond to cancer. Just do the best that you can. Ignore well-meaning advice if you don't find it helpful and look for people who listen non-judgmentally. Some people feel like they need to be strong and positive all the time, but most people experience a range of emotions, and that's ok.

Take an active role in your care

Try to be an active participant in your care. It can help you feel empowered and give you a greater sense of control. It also means you are more likely to feel confident about the care you receive.

Get organised before your appointments

Being organised can help you get more out of visits with health professionals. Have everything you need ready, including any paperwork and a list of questions you want to ask. Check out the parking situation before you head to your appointments. Either ring the clinic or see if there is info on their website so you don't

McGrath Breast Care Nurses

McGrath Breast Care Nurses provide physical, psychological and emotional support from the time of diagnosis throughout treatment. It's a free service and you don't need a referral from a doctor. The nurses are specially trained and liaise between patient and specialists—they can advocate for you, clarify technical information or jargon, and provide emotional support.

Click on the 'Get support' tab at www.mcgrathfoundation.com.au

get stuck with hefty fees. Allow extra time when you leave for your appointment, especially if you are unfamiliar with the location.

Second opinions

You have the right to get a second opinion if you would like one. In most cases, there is enough time. Don't worry about irritating your doctor—it is completely acceptable and can help you feel more confident about your choice. You'll need to get pathology and other test results transferred to the other specialist. Ask your GP for a referral—they'll be able to send all the relevant information to the second specialist and talk through your options with you.

Are there clinical trials that you might benefit from?

The [Australia and New Zealand Breast Cancer Trials group](#) lists current clinical trials for breast cancer. You can also ask about 'supportive care trials' that aim to improve quality of life. Ask your specialist whether they are involved in any trials that you might benefit from.

[This article](#) explains the risks and benefits of participating in a clinical trial.

Do you have a breast care nurse?

Although not every treatment centre has access to specialist breast care nurses, many do, so check. Some treatment centres will have their own, but be sure to ask if you haven't been referred. You can check the [McGrath Foundation's Breast Care Nurse Directory](#) to see if there are nurses available in your area.

Treat yourself

Cancer can feel all-consuming, so it's a good idea to take a break from thinking about it when you can and schedule in time to do things you enjoy that make you feel better. Check out the [Otis Foundation](#) for free retreat accommodation for you and your family.

Ask for and accept help

Your friends and family will want to help—let them! Ask them to make you a meal, help with transport after surgery, accompany you to an appointment, pick up kids if you have them, help take care of pets or walk the dog—let people know what you need and accept their offers.

Talking to your healthcare team

- Ask questions** You can find lists of questions to ask at different stages of care on websites such as Breast Cancer Network Australia and the Cancer Council. The check list in the insert in this pack will also help you identify any areas that you need to know more about or don't feel confident in.
- Make a list** Write your questions down ahead of time so you don't forget anything.
- Be open and complete** Let your doctor or nurse know about any symptoms or side effects that you notice. Information that seems incidental to you may actually be important.
- Bring a list of medicines, vitamins or supplements** you are taking. We have included one in the insert in this pack that you can complete.
- Take notes** Write down your doctor's answers to your questions. You can also ask your doctor to write down key information for you.
- Bring someone with you** Involve a friend or family member in your care. They can be your advocate if needed.
- Speak up** Be honest about how you're feeling. Discuss any concerns you have.
- Clarify** anything you don't understand or find confusing. Don't feel shy about asking your health professionals to explain things more than once or in a different way until you fully understand.
- Keep everything in one place** so nothing gets lost, and you always know where to find information.

Don't be afraid to set boundaries and say no

If you are finding all the visitors and phone calls exhausting, politely explain that you need some space to rest. You could ask a friend or family member to be the contact person and filter messages to you. Some people find it helpful to get a friend or family member to use social media (or mass emails, texts or phone calls) to update everyone on how you are doing.

Ask unwell friends and family to reschedule visits

It can be dangerous to be around people with infections such as cold or flu during cancer treatment if your immune system is suppressed. Check that your visitors are well, and stay out of busy public places where you may be exposed to infectious illnesses.

Look after your emotional wellbeing

Make sure you are getting the support you need. Sometimes cancer (and treatment for it) can be distressing. Talking to a professional such as a counsellor, psychologist, social worker, breast care nurse or GP can help provide the emotional support you need.

Talk to people who've been there

You might also find it helpful to talk to someone who has been through a similar experience. The Cancer Council has a service where they pair you with someone around your age who had similar treatments to the ones you are thinking of or already getting. Ring **13 11 20** and ask to chat to a breast cancer volunteer.

Join a support group

According to research by Cancer Council NSW, people who participate in a support group experience lower levels of depression and anxiety than those who don't. Support groups can provide a safe place to discuss what you're experiencing and build new friendships.

Each group is a little different, so if you aren't comfortable in one, try another group. Online forums and web-based support may also be helpful.

Ignore any unhelpful advice that people give—and try not to take it personally if friends 'disappear.' It's likely that some friendships will strengthen, but others may fade.

