

Natalie

This is a fictional patient whose story is based on the real-life experiences of women with secondary breast cancer.

Age: 42

Summary: A year after finishing her treatment for primary breast cancer, Natalie began to notice some pain in her back and hip. When physiotherapy didn't help, Natalie's GP referred her for some further investigations. She found out that her breast cancer had spread to her bones and lymph nodes soon after. Since then, Natalie has struggled with treatment side effects, concerns about her young son and difficulties juggling work, family life and treatment. 18 months on, she is feeling much more in control and able to cope, though is not yet ready to broach difficult conversations about the future.

Natalie's story

Natalie has been living with secondary breast cancer in her bones and lymph nodes for the last 18 months. A year after finishing treatment for primary breast cancer, she noticed some pain in her hip and lower back. As a single mum and social worker, she put this down to her busy work and family life and asked to be referred for physiotherapy. After a number of physiotherapy appointments, the pain was getting worse and she was struggling to drive to and from appointments with clients at work. Her GP referred her for some investigations and, a few weeks later, called her back to clinic to tell her that her breast cancer has spread.

Natalie feels that she is still very much coming to terms with diagnosis but that, as life is so hectic, it is hard to find the time to process. She began treatment on a chemotherapy (docetaxel) and targeted therapies (pertuzumab and trastuzumab) straight away. She initially suffered with a range of side effects, including ulcers in her mouth, digestive problems and very dry eyes. She found Macmillan's and Breast Cancer Now's online information very useful in helping her to manage these and to know what to do in between appointments. Thankfully, these symptoms eased once she had finished her chemotherapy treatment. She is currently treated with pertuzumab and trastuzumab once every three weeks and feels she is managing well.

Natalie initially struggled with the pressures of work and expectations of her employers. A chemotherapy nurse recommended she contacted a Macmillan advisor for guidance and support in this area. Natalie found this extremely helpful and felt much more confident in knowing her rights and discussing her needs with her employer. She is now working more flexible hours to fit around her treatments and the school runs. This also helps her to manage the fatigue and tiredness which are a particular struggle for her in the days following treatment.

Natalie's son is 6 years old and she hasn't yet felt able to discuss her diagnosis with him. She doesn't know how to broach it or how to know when the time is right. Her oncologist recommended looking at some online information provided by Macmillan and 'The Fruit Fly Collective', which provides information and resources to help children understand and come to terms with a family member's cancer diagnosis.

Natalie feels very supported by her family and friends, who have rallied together to help her with everything from childcare and emotional support to cooking meals and keeping her company at treatment appointments. At first Natalie found it very difficult to accept this help, but she has felt much more able to cope with the support of those around her. She senses that her family and friends also take comfort in being able to do something practical to help her and her son, too. She wants to be able to talk about the future with her family and to make practical and legal plans in terms of her will and who will care for her son. Right now, she feels this is too much for them to cope with as a family but feels reassured that there is lots of help and support available for when the time is right.

If you are experiencing anything similar to Natalie, there is lots of information and guidance on the LIBERATE website which you may find useful. Please follow the links below.

- ❖ [Symptom monitoring & tailored self-management advice](#)
- ❖ [Employment & finances](#)
- ❖ [Support for others](#)
- ❖ [Signposting to services & support](#)
- ❖ [Looking ahead](#)