

Zara

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

Age: 56

Summary: After experiencing pains in her bones for several months, Zara underwent a number of investigations and was diagnosed with secondary breast cancer in her bones and lungs. This news came three years after her primary breast cancer diagnosis. Zara had always been worried about her breast cancer returning but had not considered that it might spread elsewhere in her body. She has thrown herself into research and spends a lot of time on the internet exploring treatment options and complementary therapies. She feels she is coping well on capecitabine (Xeloda) at the moment and she and her husband are reassured by how well she is feeling and the healthy lifestyle she leads. They are planning some holidays together in the near future, once Zara retires.

Zara's story

Zara has been living with secondary breast cancer in her bones and lungs for four years.

After finishing treatment for her primary breast cancer, Zara struggled with fear and anxiety relating to the possibility of her cancer returning. During a routine check-up, she mentioned to her nurse that she had been experiencing some dull aching and pain in her back and ribs. She was referred for some scans and was diagnosed with secondary breast cancer three years after her original primary breast cancer diagnosis.

Zara coped with the shock of the diagnosis by throwing herself into researching and understanding secondary breast cancer. She spends a lot of time on the internet researching her cancer and possible treatment options, though sometimes feels overwhelmed by the amount of information she comes across and confused by conflicting evidence. She is very keen for her treatment to be holistic and has been practising yoga and mindfulness since her diagnosis. Over the years, she has also tried a number of different supplements and vitamins, though is always wary of how these might interact with her cancer treatment. She has a good relationship with her oncologist and consults her before trying anything new.

After several years on hormonal treatment, Zara is now taking a chemotherapy treatment in tablet form (capecitabine or Xeloda). She initially struggled with nausea, mouth ulcers and loss of appetite which meant she found it difficult to eat and began to lose weight. Her doctor recommended some nutritional supplement drinks, which helped her to regain her strength and these symptoms gradually eased over time. Zara now enjoys the freedom that comes with taking oral chemotherapy. She feels much less 'tied' to the hospital than when she was treated with chemotherapy for her primary breast cancer and more able to go about her normal daily life.

Zara continues to work as a mentor for secondary school pupils and feels she is well supported by her employer. She very much enjoys her job and has always been reluctant to give this up for fear of losing the sense of purpose it gives her. However, she plans to retire at the end of the next school term and to travel with her husband. She has been speaking to her oncologist about travel and medical insurance and how to make arrangements for treatment and blood tests around time abroad.

Leading a healthy lifestyle is also a real focus for Zara. This helps her to feel more in control of her cancer. Her and her husband regularly go on long walks and hikes with their two dogs, though pains in her back sometimes limit how much she can do and she finds this frustrating. She worries about taking regular pain killers though wishes she could be more in control of her pain. Swimming is a good alternative when the pain is particularly bad and Zara also finds this eases the pain and helps her to relax.

Zara prefers to find out information for herself and has never liked the idea of attending a support group. At this point in time, she feels that she and her husband are managing well on their own. She recognises, however, that there may come a time when they both need to access some form of support and hopes that there will be something available to them in their local area.

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

- ❖ [How to read the evidence](#)
- ❖ [Healthy living](#)
- ❖ [Complementary therapies](#)
- ❖ [Self-management advice – pain](#)
- ❖ [Signposting to services & support](#)
- ❖ [Psychological well-being](#)

