FCN | THE FARMING COMMUNITY NETWORK

In partnership with MACMILLAN CANCER SUPPORT

A Guide for **Farming Families Affected by Cancer**

Support, practical steps and signposting from pre-diagnosis to future planning

Disclaimer

This guide is not medical advice. Your healthcare team will always be your main source of clinical information and guidance. The suggestions here are intended to support you in daily life and on the farm, but they should never replace professional medical advice or instructions from your clinicians.

About this guide

This document has been developed by people within the farming community who have direct experience of living with cancer and undergoing cancer diagnoses, treatment and aftercare. It has been created as part of the Rural Communities Cancer Project, a UK-wide partnership between two charities: The Farming Community Network (FCN) and Macmillan Cancer Support.

We understand that living with cancer while running a farm presents unique emotional, physical, and practical challenges. This document offers clear and compassionate guidance for farmers navigating treatment, recovery and day-to-day work. It offers practical suggestions, reassurance and signposting to support and includes information and guidance about:

- Pre-diagnosis
- Post-diagnosis (pre-treatment)
- Treatment
- Post-treatment
- Planning for the future
- Help and support

Everyone's experience of cancer is different. You may find some sections more relevant than others, and that's okay.

Take things at your own pace and return to this guide whenever you need a reminder, a prompt or a bit of support.

Pre-diagnosis: before a diagnosis is confirmed

Try not to panic

Many symptoms turn out not to be cancer. Even when cancer is diagnosed, there are often effective treatments and support available. Be careful what you read online; please research only reputable sources and don't make assumptions.

Contact your GP and ask for an appointment

Explain your concerns clearly and ask about any tests you may need. Medical professionals may not always understand the realities of farm life.

Explaining your work and responsibilities can help them give advice that works for you.

Be firm and advocate for yourself - it is okay to ask questions or request further checks if you are worried.

It might be helpful to write things down or keep a diary of your symptoms to discuss at your appointment, so that you don't walk away wishing you had asked something specific.

Talk to someone you trust

Sharing concerns with family or close friends can help you feel less alone and make it easier to get support if you need it. If you're not sure who to turn to, FCN volunteers will be able to chat through your concerns. Macmillan Cancer Support also has a helpline service available. Details on how to contact FCN and Macmillan are available at the end of this guide.

Farm safety note: *If you notice changes in strength, balance, concentration or energy, consider avoiding higher-risk farm tasks until you have been checked.*

Post-diagnosis: pre-treatment

It's normal to feel shocked, numb, frightened, or unsure what to do. Give yourself time to process the news. You don't need to make every decision today.

Take time at appointments

It can help to write down questions beforehand. You may find it useful to take notes or ask permission to record the discussion. If possible, take someone with you for practical and emotional support. Remember your healthcare team will want to understand your lifestyle, including your work on the farm, so they can tailor advice to you and ensure a personalised treatment plan. Communicating your priorities on the farm will help them to help you, such as workload during harvest, lambing time etc.

> ***"I took my wife with me to every meeting about the diagnosis and what the treatment was going to be, so she fully understood what was going to be involved. I also found it really beneficial to have two sets of ears; you're a bit in the headlights, you're listening but not understanding.***
>
> ***Having my wife with me meant we could discuss the future process together after any meeting and ensure I fully understood the way forward."***
>
> Rob Venner, Livestock Auctioneer.

Make sure you understand what happens next

You may want to ask about:

- your diagnosis
- treatment options
- possible side effects
- how treatment might affect your energy and daily activities
- who to contact for advice, such as a nurse specialist or hospital helpline

While it is fresh in your mind during your appointment perhaps write down your diagnosis, the team caring for you, any tests and scans planned, and your next appointment date.

Ask about preparing for treatment. Some hospitals offer advice on gentle exercise, diet, and lifestyle changes before treatment begins. This may be referred to as 'prehab' and can aid recovery.

Choose who to tell

You don't have to share everything at once. Start with one or two trusted people who can listen, support you, or come with you to appointments. Having someone alongside you can make a real difference.

Talk to others with similar experiences if you wish. Some people find it helpful to speak to someone who has been through a similar diagnosis. This may be through friends, family, or support groups. For many people, speaking with other farmers can be especially valuable — they understand the unique pressures, worries, and practical challenges that come with farming life in a way few others can. Sometimes a friendly face and talking with someone who knows the world you're living in can make all the difference.

The FCN Rural Communities Cancer Project website features a selection of people in agriculture sharing their cancer stories which you may find useful.

Use your local Cancer Information and Support Centre

Cancer Information and Support Centres offer free, confidential, and easily accessible support for anyone affected by cancer -including patients, families, and carers - at any stage of their experience.

They are usually found within the grounds of the hospital and provide a welcoming space where people can receive emotional, practical, financial, and reliable informational support. This is all delivered by trained staff and volunteers who understand the challenges cancer brings.

You can find your nearest Information and Support Centre through the **Cancer Care Map (www.cancercaremap.org)**

Centres may be run by Macmillan or local charities and can help with:

- benefits and financial information
- travel and accommodation for treatment
- practical and emotional support

Macmillan Information Support Centres can help you find what is available locally.

Macmillan Online Community

At times, it might feel isolating, as though no one quite understands what you're going through. It's not uncommon for sleep to be disturbed, with questions on your mind at all hours of the night. The Macmillan Online Community understands what it's like to have cancer, there are various cancer forums with many members; and they have all been there. Support is available 24 hours a day, in a safe environment.

https://community.macmillan.org.uk/

Use reliable information sources

Both the Macmillan and NHS websites provide clear and trusted information about cancer and treatments. You may find it helpful to read the information given to you at your own pace and return to it when questions arise.

Look at other sources of information and support

This may include FCN, RABI, Citizens Advice, and peer support groups, including online communities.

Check what practical help you may be entitled to

This may include help with transport, accommodation, or hospital parking. Your local Information and Support Centre can help and guide you.

Plan ahead at home and on the farm

Treatment can affect people differently. Some side effects may cause tiredness, pain, or reduced strength.

You may want to consider:

- talking with family, friends, and neighbours
- accepting offers of help, even if only for a short time
- where possible, sharing responsibilities with family members or trusted workers
- looking at ways to reduce workloads temporarily, such as reducing stock numbers or using contractors
- creating some written instructions for daily routines - using whiteboards, shared calendars, or simple checklists to keep everyone aligned
- thinking about access to systems that are vital to the day to day running of the farm, e.g. log in details or who has permission to communicate with authorities such as the bank and Rural Payments Agency (RPA)

Try not to manage everything on your own

Talking things through can make a real difference. We know that some people prefer to keep illness private. While this is understandable, it can also make things harder. Remember that many people genuinely want to support you and your family. You may want to:

- share your situation with a few trusted neighbours or friends
- accept offers of help, even if only for short periods

> ***"When you have that support, be it clinical or social, then that makes the journey much more easy and more manageable."***
>
> David Purdy, John Deere Territory Business Manager

Infection and biosecurity awareness

Farms can carry a higher exposure to bacteria, dust, and animal borne infections. If your immune system is affected, small precautions can make a big difference.

Some cancer treatments lower immunity. You may wish to ask your healthcare team whether this applies to you.

You might also consider:

- limiting contact with sick or newborn animals
- avoiding exposure to slurry, manure, and dust
- planning alternatives for higher-risk tasks during treatment
- planning your work around treatment. Once in a cycle you may get to know which days you will feel best and when you may start to feel side effects
- depending on your treatment, you may require medical devices to be in situ, such as cannulas or catheters. Chat through these options with your clinician and be open and honest about your work, particularly if you are working with livestock or carry out heavy lifting

Sharing this information helps them support your safety and treatment effectively.

Family Members and Carers

A cancer diagnosis impacts not only the person diagnosed but also their family members and carers. It is common for carers and families to feel worried, overwhelmed, or uncertain about how best to help.

To support yourself those closest to you, consider:

- talking openly about your concerns and feelings
- sharing caregiving, household and farm responsibilities where possible
- seeking support and information from Macmillan Information Support centres or other relevant charities dedicated to carers

Everyone needs to take the time to look after their own wellbeing.

Treatment

It can help to break your treatment into manageable chunks and tick them off bit by bit. Looking at the whole programme at once can sometimes feel overwhelming. It's also worth remembering that treatment plans can change, and they're not always set in stone.

Ask about appointment times

If you have specific needs, you can ask whether appointments can be arranged at suitable times. This includes consideration for commitments such as livestock or harvesting times.

Keep asking questions

If new concerns come up during treatment, speak to your oncology team or specialist nurse. They will do their best to support you.

Consider having someone with you

Many people find it reassuring to have support at appointments or treatment sessions. Don't ever feel you are a burden when asking others to take the time to accompany you; they will likely be pleased to feel they are helping.

Rest when you need to

Tiredness is common during treatment. Although it can feel frustrating, listening to your body is important. Travelling to appointments can also add to the fatigue. Tiredness can increase the risk of accidents, especially when working with machinery or livestock.

Eat and drink as well as you can

Eat and drink as well as you can. Some treatments require diet changes or can affect your sense of taste and smell alongside your appetite. Your healthcare team can advise if you have concerns about your appetite or weight. Try to eat regularly, even when appetite is low, and stay hydrated, especially when working outdoors.

Infection and safety

During treatment:

- wash hands thoroughly after farm work
- change clothes and footwear before hospital visits
- avoid assisting with lambing or calving if advised
- clean cuts and wounds promptly
- avoid exposure to potentially infectious situations

Contact your healthcare team immediately if you develop signs of infection, such as a fever. It is advisable to have an accurate thermometer at home to check your temperature.

You may also wish to:

- avoid working alone where possible
- reduce tasks that require strength, balance, or long periods of concentration
- be honest with yourself as to whether you really feel able to safely carry out tasks on the farm. Treatments and side effects are varied and can affect you in many ways.

A change of pace

Working in agriculture often means long hours with early starts and late nights. There is always work to be done. However as previously mentioned, it is common to feel more fatigued than usual, slowing down your usual pace of life.

In addition, when attending medical appointments, they can vary in time and length, and it can often feel like there's lots of waiting around. Go well prepared with things to keep you busy, such as reading, downloaded podcasts/ series, mindful colouring or similar.

Mental Wellbeing

Be open and honest about your mental health and consider the advice of professionals if they think you need further support. Getting through treatment can feel overwhelming, so perhaps break things down into smaller milestones and take it one step at a time. Think about what you really enjoy and can look forward to – sometimes meeting a friend or an event can give you something to focus on.

"When you are in the cycle of treatment, time seems to drag and it feels like it will never end; but it does and things do get better."

Dave Gregory, Farmer, Devon

Post-treatment

You may well feel ready to move forward with life after treatment, but it can also be common to experience a mix of emotions and have some practical challenges to cope with.

Finishing treatment is a period of adjustment, and it takes time to settle into what life looks like now. As you move through this stage, you'll gradually discover what feels right and normal for you.

Give yourself time to recover

Some side effects can continue for weeks or months after treatment ends. Take as much time off after treatment to rest and recover as you feel you need. Farms continue to run and responsibilities remain. Even so, your recovery matters; gradual adjustments and acceptance can help support both.

Use follow-up support

Your oncology team or Information Support Centre can help with:

- managing ongoing side effects
- emotional support
- returning to everyday activities

Return to farm work gradually

Recovery is different for everyone. Coming back to farm work after treatment can feel daunting, especially when the jobs waiting for you are physical and often time-pressured. Tasks that once felt routine may take more out of you than before.

It will take time to adjust, and you may have to change things or get new pieces of equipment, for example a change of handling systems to make life easier. Listening to your body and working within your new limits isn't a sign of falling behind; it's a practical way to protect your long-term health and keep yourself safely involved in the work you love.

Carers and loved ones

The end of treatment can bring a mix of relief and exhaustion. After weeks or months of juggling hospital visits, farm work, and family responsibilities, the impact of that pressure often shows itself once things begin to settle. Feeling worn out or emotionally flat can be a natural response to such a demanding time.

In farming families, where daily tasks continue regardless of what else is happening, carers may find it especially hard to slow down or ask for support. However, a little breather, where possible, makes a world of difference.

Planning for the future

Farming considerations:

- key dates in the farm diary
- list of contacts, e.g. vet, accountants, suppliers
- ensure access to key systems, e.g. bank and RPA
- overview of farm accounts
- ensure key documents are in place and up to date, e.g. Wills, Power of Attorneys and Partnership Agreements

The FCN FarmWell website also has some great resources to help your farm business stay strong and resilient.

Living well with cancer

Whilst many cancers are treatable, for some people treatment may not be able to provide a cure. Support is available at every stage, including when care focuses on providing comfort and quality of life. It is still possible to live a happy, active and fulfilled life with cancer.

Below are some things to consider:

- Quality of life. Symptom management should be well-controlled; your medical team will help manage this and may refer you to a hospice. Hospices are there to support you to live well with a progressive condition.
- Talk about your end of life wishes. It can be an emotional and challenging conversation but also comforting in providing peace of mind for you and those around you. A hospice or your medical team can help with this.

"The world can take on exceptional beauty living with a terminal diagnosis...We are on this Earth for a relatively short time. Make the most of it and stay positive."

Robert Bendall, Farmer, Suffolk

"It's never too early to plan ahead. We sought professional help to plan succession, tenancy responsibilities, and farm finances. I also spent time with Dad documenting his 'Farm Manual'. His medicines affected his sleep, so whilst awake in the small hours, he scribbled down notes made up of key contacts, generational knowledge of field histories, meaningful trees, machinery quirks and livestock routines.

Having all this in place has given our family confidence in taking the business forwards. It gave Dad reassurance to know that his knowledge was down on paper. It's a great comfort to us as a family that we are valuing his legacy."

Angharad Binder (Daughter of Robert, quoted above).

Always remember to seek professional advice if needed to ensure you can agree on the most appropriate steps forward.

Final Message

Living with cancer while running or working on a farm can be incredibly challenging, but you are not alone.

Support exists - financial, emotional, and practical. By planning ahead, leaning on your community, and adapting your workload, you can continue to care for both your health and your farm.

Your wellbeing matters to you, your family, the people who care about you, and your farm. Asking for help is a practical and positive step and shouldn't be considered a weakness. Support is available.

> ***"I had a friend who was a volunteer at The Farming Community Network, he was in contact with me regularly to check that I was OK, that support helped me through the difficult times."***
>
> Denys Fell, Farmer, East Yorkshire

Help and Support

If you would like information, practical guidance, or someone to talk to, help is available when you need it.

FCN and Macmillan offer confidential support for farming families, alongside your healthcare team.

FCN helpline: **03000 111 999**
FCN e-helpline: **help@fcn.org.uk**
Macmillan support line: **0808 808 00 00**

Further reading:
Rural Communities Cancer Project - Farming Community Network
www.fcn.org.uk/cancersupport

The FCN FarmWell website
https://farmwell.org.uk

Cancer information and support | Macmillan Cancer Support
www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support
Cancer Care Map Homepage
www.cancercaremap.org

For any concerns about your health, including questions relating to cancer, please refer to the NHS website
www.nhs.uk

This document is intended as a supportive checklist and legacy resource. It may be shared with farming families and professionals supporting them.

Information in this guide is correct at the time of publication

Your notes and questions

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We would like to offer our thanks to all who have contributed to this document and the wider Rural Communities Cancer Project.

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FCN helpline: 03000 111 999
Email: help@fcn.org.uk

Macmillan support line: 0808 808 00 00

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