

# Improving nutrition in cancer survivors

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Stories involving cancer and its devastating consequences are a frequent occurrence in the news. We are constantly being told which foods may cause cancer, and which may prevent it, but how much is fact, and how much is fiction is often in dispute. The same is true for cancer survivors trying to find reliable nutritional information which will help them to improve their quality of life and prevent future relapses.

A team of researchers at Bournemouth University (BU), led by Dr Jane Murphy, are working with cancer nurse specialists to change that. By developing an e-learning tool for [healthcare professionals](#), the team has created an innovative way of educating and empowering frontline staff to deliver reliable and helpful information about nutrition. The tool provides staff with accurate and evidence based [nutritional information](#) for cancer survivors. By teaming up with UK charity Macmillan Cancer Support, the [online tool](#) was made available through Macmillan's Learn Zone webpages, which increased the number of people who could access it.

For busy frontline staff, the online learning tool has proved hugely beneficial, as they are able to use the resource as and when they need to. Much of Dr Murphy's research focused on making the tool as user-friendly as possible, in order to avoid it becoming an onerous or time-consuming learning experience. The content needed to be evidence-based, but delivered in an accessible way, through bite-sized chunks and interactive sessions. It also needed to be pitched at a level appropriate for professionals, without either dumbing down or becoming overly technical. As Dr Murphy explains: "The tool was not specifically

designed for people who have had a cancer diagnosis, although cancer survivors themselves can still use it and benefit from it; it was made with healthcare professionals in mind."

The tool was evaluated through focus groups, made up of practice nurses, cancer nurse specialists, nutritionists, GPs and recovered cancer patients. Thematic analysis of the results plus anecdotal evidence showed that before using the e-learning resource few healthcare professionals had received any training about nutrition for cancer survivors. Responses showed that being able to use Dr Murphy's tool left healthcare professionals feeling more empowered and confident about having an informed discussion with their patients. Staff also cited their confidence in the accuracy of the information in the online tool; feedback no doubt helped by the added credibility through support from Macmillan.

The use of evidence-based information was hugely important in the development of the tool. As Dr Murphy explained: "There is a lot of misinformation out there around food and nutrition. For cancer survivors, it is fair to say that there is a lot of information available, but is it correct? Can it improve health and wellbeing and give the best chance of survival?"

"For instance, it is very easy to find the wrong sorts of information through the internet. This was another reason to develop an online tool, working in partnership with Macmillan that uses really robust and accurate evidence." The research and evaluation of the e-learning tool was published in Nurse Education Today which is widely-read by nurses, nurse practitioners and other allied health care professionals. Dr Murphy explains that the decision to publish open access was driven by a desire to see their research and online [tool](#) have the biggest possible impact on the lives of cancer survivors. The resource remains live and accessible on the Macmillan Cancer Support website and is being used and updated regularly. The work has also played a key role in informing a new

initiative by Macmillan to improve the lives of [cancer survivors](#) through healthier lifestyles.

Dr Murphy and the team at BU are now researching the complex nutritional needs of people with dementia. Working with local organisations and care homes, their research (funded by The Burdett Trust for Nursing) will develop a better understanding of the delivery of nutrition to enhance dignity in dementia care. By creating a toolkit and suite of educational tools for healthcare professionals and carers, they aim to improve the lives of those with dementia.

**More information:** "Translating research into practice: evaluation of an e-learning resource for health care professionals to provide nutrition advice and support for cancer survivors." *Nurse Educ Today*. 2015 Jan;35(1):271-6. [DOI: 10.1016/j.nedt.2014.05.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2014.05.009)

Provided by Bournemouth University

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