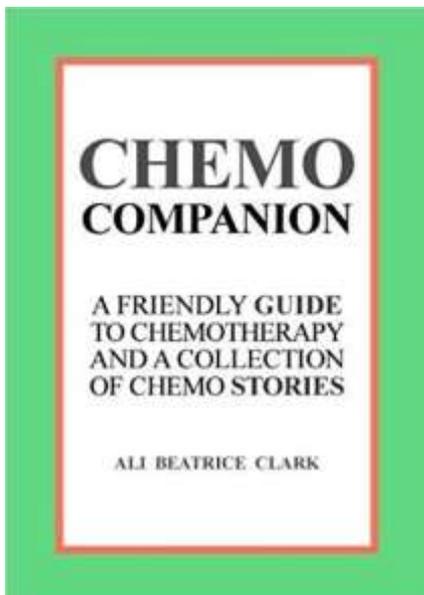


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BOOK REVIEWS

Read what people affected by cancer think about...



Chemo companion. A friendly guide to chemotherapy and a collection of chemo stories (2019)

Clark AB.

Henley-on-Thames: Rethink Street Publishing, 2019.

78pp.

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Average star rating 3.9 (out of 5)

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As the title says, this is written to be a 'companion' to someone about to have chemotherapy and will be great for someone about to have chemotherapy or during treatment, or for carers; it will also give health professionals an insight into chemo.

The design is very simple; it is self-published but doesn't give that impression. The content is in a logical order, from first consultation, through treatment, to coming out the other side. The author has been careful to work with a cancer specialist on this guide and, as she says, everyone's experience of chemo is different, so whilst some of the experiences are different from mine, they are not inaccurate. The language is easy and accessible, and any technical words, e.g. drugs, are explained. There is a useful list of support organisations. I like the honest, open tone; overall, it's as if a friend is explaining it to you, and others are relating their experiences in a chat!

I like the logical flow, which gives you the 'standard' medical information (The Guide) first, then a series of patient experiences related in a conversational style (The Stories). The Guide has information on aspects such as side-effects, work and money, food, physical exercise, and a section on thoughts and feelings that I thought particularly well written and useful. It explains the benefits of talking, connecting with people and 'quietening the mind', which will be helpful to the reader. The Stories demonstrate the range of experiences – positive and negative – with ideas for coping and getting back to normal. Some of these experiences are written as recollections, others as letters – e.g. Goodbye Red Wine – honestly, thoughtfully, and with humour. They detail emotional responses to treatment and give a good insight into what it's like. At the end of each is one line of useful advice. There are also blank pages at the back for personal notes – a good idea.

Unlike information that does not explain how chemotherapy may affect people differently, this is factual and supportive. People are often frightened by the idea of chemo and this helps to explain it in a straightforward way; it also reassures about what you may go through and how others have dealt with it, how having chemo can give you greater knowledge about yourself and how strong and resilient you can be.

An excellently written, very readable small book, big on insights, experience, and the wisdom of those who've been through it. If it were given to patients to read by their health professional or counsellor that would be a real help.

In remission from breast cancer (56-65) (August 2019)

This well-balanced book from someone who has been impacted by chemotherapy takes you through every aspect of treatment and beyond. It helps you to understand what chemotherapy may be doing to your body, your mind and your life. It gives you useful tips and information, practical advice and reassurance, and reminds you that you are not alone. The title explains all, a friendly guide to chemo. It is very easy to read and understand and the size makes it easy to pick up and enjoy.

Part 1 is a brief guide to the time before, during and after chemotherapy, including planning and preparation, common side effects, your thoughts and feelings, food and exercise, work and money issues, how you might feel after treatment, and where to find further help and support. Part 2 is a collection of true, real-life experiences of chemotherapy. Each one is candid and honest and shared in the spirit of kindness and friendship, including an overly complicated salad, finding long-lost relatives, flying paper aeroplanes, writing to new online pen-pals, and tips for friends who don't know what to say.

It is short and to the point and I recommend it to anyone who is going through chemo, or who will be in the future.

Living with blood cancer (66-75) (July 2019)

This is a useful book for a wide range of people due to its insight into what patients might go through; fear of the unknown can be one of the most frightening parts of the journey. It gives you an insight into what patients may face, the possible side effects, and what may happen afterwards. Because it touches on nearly every aspect, it may bring up things that the patient may not have been aware of or thought to ask about.

It is laid out in a clear and concise order, making it easy to read and follow. It is easy to understand, and the language is appropriate for the intended audience. I found it an appealing book. It is a simple, honest insight into chemotherapy, but the author also gives it a touch of warmth, which, given the subject, makes it an enjoyable read.

I enjoyed everything about this book, especially the personal stories.

Relative of cancer patient (36-45) (June 2019)

I recommend this useful book; it makes you feel less alone with how you feel. It is well worth reading for anyone having chemotherapy or those supporting them. It is factual and will help people understand all aspects – you need as much info as possible. It is easy to read and understand, written in a way that will help everyone understand the different terms.

In remission from endometrial cancer and living with non-Hodgkin lymphoma (56-65) (June 2019)

This is a useful book to refer to. Part 1 gives an overview of chemotherapy and cancer: planning; preparation; medical matters; location; practical suggestions; side effects; food; work and money; physical activities; thoughts and feelings; after treatment; and support organisations. Part 2 is a collection of chemo stories.

It is very easy to understand, written by a chemotherapy patient using her experience to help others. The cover is attractive, and the book is printed on good quality paper in a large font. There are blank pages at the end for the reader's notes – there is a note from the author, not to use these pages if it is a library book!

It collates information in one place and provides many practical tips that I have not seen elsewhere. I am starting chemotherapy for the first time in a couple of weeks, and I have added some of the suggested questions for the orientation visit to the chemotherapy unit to my list, as I had not considered these previously. The second part has a good variety of first-hand experiences, I particularly like "My advice..." at the end of each story. I really like the personal touch that comes across. Yes, the information in Part 1 is available in other publications but it is presented in a very friendly format in this book.

Living with metastatic breast cancer (56-65) (May 2019)

This has invaluable information on how to cope with chemotherapy. The first part explains chemotherapy, with sections on how to prepare, medical monitoring, side effects, job and money concerns, feelings, food, and physical activity. At the end is a list of well-known charities in case the patient needs support. The second part includes testimonials of patients who had chemotherapy, including the author. I found it straightforward to understand. The paper quality is excellent, and the large font makes it easy to read. There are no illustrations, but this does not matter.

The author is a cancer patient who has been through multiple surgeries and chemo. She appears strong and resilient and found it in herself to think of others while having a tough time. Hers is the first testimonial and she is honest about chemotherapy and its side effects. The others are from patients from a wide range of backgrounds; they describe clearly the side effects and how they managed to cope and recover.

Family member of someone with breast cancer (26-35) (May 2019)



This book gives a good, honest insight into what patients may go through with chemotherapy emotionally and physically. Therefore, it would be a useful guide to anyone, whether having chemotherapy or supporting someone who is. The main themes that I picked up were that it emphasises that every single person is different so not to expect any one side effect because each person has a unique experience and different feelings about it. Additionally, the importance of looking after your general health and making allowances for tiredness, and other side effects is useful.

The title is excellent – it automatically helps the reader feel that the book is a positive helpful guide. The size of the typeface, the white space and length of book are ideal. The language is straightforward and easy to read. It is not written in a ‘clinical’ way and somehow the language lessens the fear associated with ‘chemotherapy’. It helps put into perspective the sizable number of people that experience this treatment and incorporate it into their routines, which I hope will make people feel less isolated.

It is informative, especially for those about to have chemotherapy or supporting a patient. It starts with an overview of chemotherapy and associated practical matters then talks about the side-effects that may occur as well as ways to mitigate them. This is followed by real-life stories that consolidate the information. People from all walks of life will be able to relate to the practical tips, such as what to wear when attending for IV drip treatment, and an honest account of the reality of the ‘cold cap’. The information about possible side-effects reflects that given by the medical team but this book makes it less threatening, easier to understand and relate to.

An easy-to-read, user-friendly book written as if by an experienced friend. I like the excellent links to other specialist organisations and that the author stresses that the Equality Act 2010 applies to cancer patients – many may not know, and it will help them know if they are being treated unfairly or discriminated against. The importance of looking after general health is covered constructively, and I like the emphasis on there being no ‘right way’ to feel or be during this treatment or experience. There is a good balance of coverage on physical and mental health. I would like a little more on the physical process of how chemotherapy works and what it entails.

My father has secondary bowel cancer (46-55) (August 2019)

In this crowd-funded book, the author, Ali Beatrice Clark provides a no-nonsense guide for people who are about to have chemotherapy. The second half comprises people’s tales of their chemotherapy – some good experiences, some not so good. This brings the subject to life by linking theory and practical reality. It could be read at any time and would be reassuring for people who are new to the subject.

It is a short book with a no-nonsense cover and very easy to understand – the author writes plainly. The layout is clear, and the font is easy to read. However, I think the author missed a trick by placing all the information in continuous prose; she could have used lists and tables to add clarity to some of the information.

This is a general book about chemotherapy; it does not ‘tell all’ and nor should it. The information is plainly presented and remains generalised to meet the needs of people having different chemotherapy regimes. It is a useful introduction, a good resource when coupled with specific information about a particular cancer and its treatment. I like its simplicity; it signposts readers to other sources of help and information, uses plain facts, and adds personal accounts to bring the information to life.

Former health professional (66-75) (July 2019)

This step-by-step account of chemotherapy sets out what should be expected from beginning to end and will be helpful for someone with cancer, their family or friends. There could be a little more on living with cancer after treatment; it is mentioned but life after treatment and anxiety about reoccurrence is a very important step.

The size will encourage anyone to pick it up and have a read. The design and quality are adequate and it's written in simple easy to understand language. I don't think there are any technical words that the intended audience won't understand.

The author gives a good account of events. On page 23, under Sickness, Tiredness and Other Issues, she writes, "Your skin and nails could temporarily change, and you may get numbness or tingling in your feet and hands". I started to feel tingling and numbness in my feet after my sixth session and my plan was altered immediately. It's very important that the patient tells the consultant of any symptoms straight away. Also, the tingling isn't always temporary. It's now three years since I completed chemotherapy and I still have peripheral neuropathy in my right foot and lower leg.

The patient stories are well written and varied. It isn't depressing or frightening, despite the topic. It offers emotional support and information about what to expect. Perhaps the author could have added that not all side effects are temporary and a little more information on living with cancer after treatment.

I enjoyed this book, I found it easy to read and written with warmth and compassion. It would have helped me enormously; it would have given me insight into what to expect. Although my parents died of cancer, they did not have chemotherapy and I had no prior experience. I started having pains in my tummy for a couple of weeks and ended up in A&E. Within two weeks I had a hemicolectomy followed by eight sessions of chemotherapy. It happened so quickly, and I didn't know what to expect.

Living with leukaemia (66-75) (July 2019)

This is useful as a general starting point. It is very easy to read, and the author's story really brings this little book to life. The subtitle describes it as friendly and indeed it is friendly in tone, clear and accessible. The headings and sections are clear, although there are no illustrations or photos.

As the author readily acknowledges, everyone's chemo experience is different and there are many regimes, so the information in the book must be generic. It doesn't aim to give specific information about individual chemo types so that means it is a general introduction to chemo rather than a specific chemo companion. For example, a common chemo for many breast cancers makes your urine red – this is handy to know beforehand but not relevant to many chemo patients. This is not really a negative point; it will be a good first read before absorbing more information from a different source about the actual chemo you will be receiving.

Breast cancer patient (56-65) (July 2019)

This is a practical, easy-to-read guide on what to expect – on the day and in the weeks between treatments, ‘chemo brain’, changes in appetite, things to wear, the cold cap – followed by real-life stories from people who have had chemotherapy and their advice to those about to start. The first half can feel vague but, as the author points out, everyone’s experience is different so it’s hard to pinpoint how you will feel. However, the personal stories resonate and make the book.

A good book all round. It is easy to understand and well thought out, discussing most questions that someone about to embark on chemotherapy might ask. It also has some handy tips on where to look further for support. The personal stories are honest, from the heart, and give a real insight into what others have experienced. Some answer the things that most books won’t tackle, which is important.

Breast cancer survivor (46-55) (July 2019)

This could be useful for anyone caring for a patient who doesn’t know much about chemotherapy. The cover says exactly what it is about, the layout is fine, and the content easy to understand. I might recommend it. The information from patients is helpful without being scary but it is a bit matter of fact and the tone non-committal and a little cold; there is no warmth. It didn’t engage me as well as other books about cancer, partly because it is like the leaflets I was given at the hospital. There seems to be no rapport between author and reader. However, the patient stories are very useful. After all, until you’ve been there, you just don’t understand how it feels.

Breast cancer patient (56-65) (June 2019)

This is exactly as stated on the cover: “A friendly guide to chemotherapy”. It tells you how to prepare in advance of your chemo and has some tips for carers, family and friends. It is easy to understand, and any technical words are explained in the text. It is lightweight and very portable. The cover doesn’t invite you to read what is a good collection of stories and some good advice about many aspects of chemotherapy.

The practical advice makes this a useful book to have before your chemotherapy starts. Although you meet with a nurse to talk through your treatment, you do forget things and this book would be a useful reminder.

Breast cancer patient (56-65) (June 2019)

I found Part 1 (The Chemo Guide) useful in parts, but too general and there is no information on some of the more life-threatening and long-lasting side-effects; this may be intentional, as the aim is to reassure not alarm. Overall, it does what it says on the cover. It is a nice size and easy to understand. The patient stories are the most valuable aspect, demonstrating how life goes on during and after chemotherapy. They are told in a friendly, accessible manner, which someone about to start chemotherapy would find reassuring.

Surviving breast, melanoma and blood cancer (46-55) (June 2019)

This will be most useful for a cancer patient but could give family and friends insight and help them support the patient. It is aimed at providing guidance during chemotherapy and is solely about this treatment despite some references to surgery. It focuses on curative chemotherapy rather than ongoing chemotherapy for those with a stage 4 diagnosis. It is well thought out, starting from the initial conversation with doctors about chemotherapy as part of a treatment plan to life after treatment. It is helpful to have the guidance before the stories; you can focus on key information and work out what is best for you, before reading the opinions and stories of others.

Whilst not having the most attractive and bold cover, the typeface and font size make the text easy to read; when your eyes deteriorate like mine due to chemotherapy, this is very useful. There are no illustrations, but the book is short enough to read in one sitting. The author is light hearted in the way that she discusses chemotherapy side effects, so it won't intimidate someone about to start chemotherapy, yet still provides most of the facts. It is easy to read. The author puts the advice very clearly, avoiding medical jargon, and explaining what it means in the very few times that it is used. For those newly diagnosed who would like some guidance that is easily digestible, this is a very good book in providing guidance in a way that won't overwhelm someone.

There are no inaccuracies, but when discussing physical activity, the author does not discuss the importance of talking with your doctor about suitable activities and refers to swimming, which is generally advised against during chemotherapy due to the risk of infection. Generally, however, it is extremely accurate and has clearly been done with the support of medical professionals in ensuring that the correct advice is given.

It is informative about possible side effects and problems, but not scary, important when newly diagnosed. I would have found many of the tips about preparing for chemotherapy very useful, such as noting the names of people involved with my treatment and planning dental work beforehand. I love how each story ends with advice. The summaries prevent readers being overwhelmed but much of it is readily available in leaflets. The most useful information is about how to prepare for chemotherapy, as this is where information tends to be lacking. It doesn't cover things that aren't in many leaflets, such as the possibility of having to inject yourself during treatment and how common hot flushes are, particularly if you are put into the menopause to protect fertility. Most of the information will be provided by the doctor but it is still a handy companion and puts things in a simpler way than a healthcare professional might. The patients' stories are mainly from elderly cancer patients, and as a young person, it felt harder to relate to.

It is worth a read if you are about to start chemotherapy, as it supports you through all stages. The stories illustrate well how it affects people differently and how people have different ways of coping. Barbara's story has excellent advice for the patient and their friends and relatives, and that I wish I had had during my treatment.

Breast cancer patient (26-35) (June 2019)



This is written for a general audience and the font is large and easy to read. It might be useful for carers or friends, but not those about to have chemotherapy. People describe negative experiences in detail, including long-term side effects – not necessarily something that those about to have chemotherapy want to see.

I might recommend it; it will depend on the reader's personality and mood. It is not uplifting, but the facts, warts and all, and the thoughts once chemo is over. It could be useful if someone wants to decide whether to have chemo and the account by someone who relied on alcohol and now wishes she hadn't (pp. 58-59) is a sensible and friendly warning for others who might be thinking of the same means of comfort. There are some useful details of charities (p. 35), although it is a brief list.

Carer for someone with prostate cancer (56-65) (October 2019)

The author wrote this after chemotherapy. The first part explains chemotherapy and the issues around it; the second is a collection of people's experiences. It would be useful for anyone having chemotherapy or those supporting them, enabling them to understand the issues and possible side effects. The first part is well signposted and covers useful information for someone new to chemotherapy, describing issues such as infection, hair loss and side effects in a factual but supportive manner. Clark also gives some useful advice, such as ensuring the patient drinks plenty of fluids to help circulate the drugs through the system and flush them out, complementary therapies to help with the side-effects, and where to go to for advice on money and work.

It is a good size and easy to handle, the paper is good quality and the typeface is clear. The back is informative but the text and typeface on the front are unattractive. As the back explains the contents, the front just needs the title followed by 'A friendly guide' and possibly a picture. The author explains technical terms as she goes along. There may be an inaccuracy on page 12. The author states that any benign tumour should not cause any trouble and if it does it will be limited to the area of the body where it is situated. I'm not sure that this is true of benign brain tumours; depending on where the tumour is, it may affect vision or balance, for example.

I like the easy style of the first section – informative but not technical or scary – but the case studies are not all as helpful. Clark's feels relevant, some of the others less so; we are all unique and so are our chemo stories – they might be off-putting and cause more anxiety. What is useful, however, is the advice at the end of some of the case studies. I like the blank pages at the end for people notes or thoughts.

I recommend it to someone having chemotherapy for the first time with the proviso that they should read the case studies only when they have found how it is going for them physically and emotionally. My rating is based on my reservations about the stories, rather than Part 1.

Lead volunteer for a practical and emotional support service supporting people in their homes (66-75) (May 2019)



This book works well to explain the possible side effects of chemotherapy but, although it encourages positivity, it feels a little patronising at times. It is useful for those caring for someone as it vaguely approaches how to be there for them. The ideas for gifts, for example, is a nice touch – it's easy to forget that scented items or alcohol may no longer be suitable for someone having chemotherapy. It is perhaps most useful for the personal stories. Each story is different, and everyone had different methods of dealing with cancer and chemotherapy as well as dealing with people around them. It's very easy to identify with.

The language is really easy to understand, and the book is easy to follow. However, I found the tone a little patronising. I know my dad wouldn't have enjoyed reading it. It sometimes feels aimed more at young teenagers. I didn't notice any inaccuracies, but I feel that the book missed a lot of information. Perhaps a symptom breakdown and more information about the drugs themselves would be more beneficial.

The personal stories are a nice touch and prove that everyone can be affected in different ways. I also love that the supporting charities are listed, such as Macmillan and Maggie's; however, more could have been done in this section. There are many online resources that may be more accessible to home-bound people.

It could be useful for younger people new to cancer, but I found it too simple and lacking in substance. An online forum full of real people, in real time would be far more beneficial than a short book that lacks a lot of information. Although the real-life stories are good, they are not long enough to really imagine the people and their day-to-day lives. In fact, the whole book feels a little rushed.

**Dealing with the loss of my father due to metastasised kidney cancer (18-25)
(June 2019)**



I am not sure that this book is especially helpful to any one group. The process of chemotherapy is handled logically, and it is very easy to understand but the points made can be found in more authoritative publications – this adds little to the materials more freely available. It is printed on strong paper in a clear typeface, but the presentation is not appealing.

I had thought that this book would help shed some light on the experience of chemotherapy but learnt very little. The materials provided by the chemotherapy units and Macmillan nurses have more useful and frank information. It is difficult to identify the purpose of this book. The author admits to having no medical experience and that they intend to provide brief general advice. What advice there is will have been provided to those having chemotherapy by professionals. It is an easy read but mainly because it lacks substance and is too general to be of much use.

The highlights of the advice include: no two cancer cases are the same; preparing for chemotherapy is like getting ready for a journey; get a thermometer. The rest of the first section is a repeat of readily available advice culminating in the statement that some people look back at their cancer episode as a fantastic turning point in their lives, others feel like a great injustice has been done (p. 29). The author misses an opportunity to explore this in more detail. The most powerful point made by the author is the fact that the months and years following chemotherapy can be more emotionally challenging than treatment itself and that some of the physical side effects may not appear until later (p. 34). Again, however, the author does not expand on this very important piece of advice. Part two (The Chemo Stories) adds little to informing those having chemotherapy.

There was scope to add to the patient information resources, but the author fails to do this; individuals would be better guided towards already published materials.

Cancer survivor, retired health professional (66-75) (July 2019)

Further information

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We use reviews to help us compile a list of suggested cancer books, the [Macmillan Core Book List](#). Cancer information centres and public libraries can use this list to select appropriate and relevant books for people affected by cancer.

We add reviews to the [Directory of information materials for people affected by cancer](#) so that people affected by cancer can see what others in a similar situation think about a book. You can also see details of all the books reviewed in the [Book reviews listing](#), which also has links to all the reviews.

We recruit most of our reviewers through the [Volunteering Village](#) and the [Cancer Voices Network](#), people affected by cancer who have signed up to help Macmillan Cancer Support in a number of ways. Volunteers are a vital part of our book review process; since 2007, over 1,500 Macmillan volunteers have written more than 6,000 reviews of over 500 different books.

If you are a health professional who would like to review books for us, please [email Sue Hawkins](#), Information Materials Researcher, Macmillan Cancer Support.

Information and support for people affected by cancer

If you are looking for support to help you live life with cancer, you may wish to contact one of [Macmillan's cancer information and support services](#). Or you can call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00** (Mon-Fri 9am–8pm). We have an interpreting service in over 200 languages. Just state, in English, the language you wish to use. If you are deaf or hard of hearing you can use textphone no 0808 808 0121 or Text Relay.

You can also email us using the [website enquiry form](#). Alternatively, [visit our website](#).

Feedback

If you have any comments, please [email Sue Hawkins](#), Information Materials Researcher, Macmillan Cancer Support.

We're here to help everyone with cancer live life as fully as they can, providing physical, financial and emotional support. So whatever cancer throws your way, we're right there with you.

For information, support or just someone to talk to, call 0808 808 00 00 or visit macmillan.org.uk

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