

'IF YOU CATCH CANCER EARLY, THERE'S A LOT THEY CAN DO'

In an intimate interview, Shirley Ballas shares her health scares – and explains why Macmillan is a charity so close to her heart. By **Rosie Mullender**



A step ahead

Having had cancer surgery in the past, Shirley Ballas stresses the importance of regular health checks



Shirley Ballas never stays still for long – and not just on the dancefloor. This interview was done in two parts: in the first, in February, she’s just returned home from a month of touring with *Strictly Come Dancing Live!*. But her bags are already repacked for a trip teaching and lecturing across the US, as well as visiting her son and 16-month-old grandson – “one of the most special things to ever happen to me”, Ballas says of little Banksi.

In the second, in late March, she’s just been up north for her aunt’s 90th birthday celebrations, and is about to prepare couples for the British Open of the World Ballroom and Latin Championships. Ballas is also excited to soon be helping her son choreograph a film called *The Light Fantastic*. “Working with him has been on my bucket list for ever!” she says.

But no matter how busy she is, Ballas is very happy to give up her time to talk about Macmillan Cancer Support – a cause very close to her heart. The international Latin dancing champion, dance coach and *Strictly* head judge has supported friends and family members through cancer, and faced the diagnosis herself on more than one occasion.

“I’ve had many scares over the years,” says Ballas, 64, whose glittering career has earned her the nickname “The Queen of Latin”.

In 2021, she told *The Times* how one such scare was triggered after an eagle-eyed *Strictly* viewer spotted a lump in her arm. “I tend to use my arms if I’m demonstrating actions like the paso doble.

“After an episode of the show, a lady wrote to me and said, ‘I think I see a lump underneath your arm.’ Then somebody else wrote in to say the same. So I had a look and they were right: there was a lump there, which I got checked.”

Thankfully, it turned out to be nothing serious, but it wasn’t the first time Ballas had braced herself for a cancer diagnosis. She has had a cancerous lump removed from her uterus – “they didn’t get it all the first time, so they had to go back in to cauterise it. I seem to be forever having health checks, but I don’t think you should ignore anything going on in your body.”

Ballas’s friendship with fellow *Strictly* star Amy Dowden, who was diagnosed with stage-three breast cancer in 2023, has also inspired her to keep a close eye on her health.



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"I learnt a lot from Amy – she's the bravest person I know," Ballas says. "She was a student of mine and a good friend on the show, and it was hard seeing someone go through a mastectomy at just 32. She was gracious enough to share what she went through to encourage people to get checked out the minute they find something suspicious.

"People often get embarrassed, but you have to remember that doctors see your body as a machine. It's so important to get symptoms checked out, because if you catch cancer early there's a lot they can do – and, of course, you can get the support you need from Macmillan.

"Cancer doesn't just take the patient by surprise, but everyone who surrounds them," Ballas explains. "Macmillan nurses provide such incredible emotional and physical support to cancer patients and their families, including those who don't know where to turn when they're losing or have lost a loved one. They're there for you, seven days a week."

Through the years, Ballas's own family has been devastated by the impact of cancer. The BBC's *Who Do You Think You Are?* revealed that her great-grandfather had died of cancer aged just 31 – "until then, everyone thought he'd died of a broken heart" – and she has lost two aunts to the disease. "So unfortunately, I'm very familiar with the effect it can have."

But its biggest impact on Ballas came six years ago when her mother,

Family first

Ballas cared for her mother when she was diagnosed with cancer

Audrey Rich, now 87, was diagnosed with colon cancer.

“The memory of that time is so sharp in my mind,” says Ballas. “I remember exactly where I was when she called me to say, ‘I have cancer.’ I was in Blackpool for an amateur Latin evening, and I was absolutely frantic, while she was as calm as can be.

“I went straight home and stayed with her for three weeks to cook for her – which she was grateful for, even though I was appalling at it. We’d already lost my brother [David, who died by suicide in 2003 aged 44], and Mum had lost her sisters to cancer, so it was a very scary and emotional time. She’s never been a worrier, so she’d be there in the kitchen dancing in her dressing gown, while I found it very difficult to deal with.

“She had an operation and is now five years in remission, but it’s terrifying when you think you’re going to lose somebody. She’s my precious cargo – I couldn’t imagine life without her.”

*Interview
continues
below*



Having been touched by cancer in so many ways, Ballas is now a passionate supporter of Macmillan. She regularly gives up her time to support the charity's work – including hosting coffee mornings and taking part in its annual carol concert – and is a great believer in the power of gifts in wills.

“Any amount you leave to Macmillan, small or large, goes towards all the wonderful things it does,” she says. “Receiving money from wills is vital to help Macmillan continue its good work.”

Macmillan's Free Will Service makes leaving a legacy to the charity in your will easy, and Ballas believes donating is an inspiring way of leaving something behind that will make its mark on others' lives for years to come.

“If you haven't been touched by cancer, you probably won't have thought too much about it,” she says. “But at some point in your lifetime, it will knock on your door or the door of somebody you know – and when it does, it will make you think about the legacy you want to leave behind.”

“Choosing to support Macmillan in your will can help other people's children, aunties, uncles and mothers. We come into this world with nothing and leave with nothing, so why not leave some of what you gained in between to a good cause?”

WHAT A GIFT IN YOUR WILL CAN DO

Each year, Macmillan reaches more than two million people – and a third of this work is funded by legacies

A cancer diagnosis can turn life upside down, leaving patients and their loved ones uncertain about the future and what might happen next, which is why, through its 114-year history, Macmillan has provided a lifeline to cancer patients and their families alike.

Currently, almost 3.5 million people are living with cancer in the UK, and Macmillan has gained a reputation for supporting cancer patients throughout their journey, from diagnosis and treatment to emotional support and end-of-life care.



In 2023 Macmillan's social, emotional and practical support services reached an estimated 2.3 million people affected by cancer. In that same year, around 92,000 people accessed Macmillan information and support centres, while 730,000 received in-person support from Macmillan nurses and support workers in homes, hospitals and Macmillan Centres across the UK, at all stages of their cancer journey.

Macmillan is doing everything it can to support those people and their loved ones, working alongside community leaders, supporters and volunteers, healthcare professionals, decision-makers and partners to provide them with the best possible care.

Catering for the holistic needs of cancer patients, including their mental wellbeing, is a primary concern for Macmillan, and in 2023 it facilitated 59,000 Holistic Needs Assessments to help people living with cancer receive a personalised care plan.

The charity also invests in cancer treatment and technologies designed to improve patient care. These include advanced AI and MRI diagnostic tools and Neutrocheck, a specialist finger-prick blood test that helps doctors to identify patients at risk of neutropenic sepsis (a potentially fatal complication from chemotherapy).

Its nurses, who are renowned for their dedication to caring for patients' wellbeing, are well supported to help their skills reach further: in 2023

Macmillan supported 490 education grants and invested £38 million to fund 314 full-time Macmillan professional roles focusing on person-centred care.

Macmillan is also there to help with how you are feeling. In 2023, the Macmillan Buddies service offered over 38,000 support sessions to over 3,500 people. Going through cancer can be an isolating experience at any time. Through this service, cancer patients are matched with someone who understands what they're going through, and they'll give you a weekly telephone call or video call, if you prefer.

All this is possible thanks to generous donations from people like you. Over a third of Macmillan's vital work is funded via gifts in wills, and the charity's Free Will Service means it's easier than ever to leave a legacy that will make a difference for generations to come.

To order your free Gifts in Wills guide, visit macmillan.org.uk/giftsinwills or call 0800 542 0164

If you would like to read more about how gifts in wills support Macmillan's vital work, [read these stories](#)