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Amy Winehouse's father, Mitch, tells us about his family's experience of cancer and why health checks are now part of his routine.

The word 'cancer' was taboo when I was a boy...

No one spoke of it and no one seemed to know anyone who had it. I was in my teens when it first entered my world. All I understood was that my dad, Alec, had stepped on a nail, he was ill and jaundiced.

A year later, in 1965, he was admitted to the London Chest hospital and they told us he had lung cancer. Dad fainted. That was the end of his working life, he parked up the cab, and for the next two years he was at home with mum as his carer.

“ If there'd been the support, some benefits advice back then, perhaps my mum would've been able to give all her time to my dad. ”

Mitch



Looking back on it now, I realise how hard it must have been for my mum worrying about money. She was a hairdresser so instead of going out to clients, they had to come to her so she could juggle looking after dad with trying to earn enough to keep us fed and pay the bills. I remember lots of people bringing food to us. If there'd been the support, some benefits advice back then, perhaps she'd have been able to give all her time to him.

Dad died in the night...

It was the only night he slept apart from my mum. She was in the spare bedroom with her sister when she heard him cough. When she got to him, he'd gone, aged just 46. I was devastated. Everyone kept telling me: 'You're the man of the house now, stop crying.'

At that time there was no emotional support, no place for my grief. We were a very close family so the sadness we all felt - me, mum Cynthia, and my sister Melody - still brings me to tears, even after all this time.

We then had several other experiences of cancer in our family. My paternal grandmother was in her seventies when she was told she had breast cancer but she lived to 101; my mother's twin sister died of a brain tumour; my mum's second husband, my stepfather, Larry, died of lung cancer; my paternal uncle died of lung cancer.

We first knew something was wrong with my mum on a family holiday...

She wasn't a great walker but even so, she was distressed and out of breath when we were out one day.

Melody and I were with her when she got the test result, which showed it was inoperable lung cancer. Mum went to live with her sister who struggled to keep mum's medication under control - I'd visit and she'd be hallucinating.

“ For two wonderful, happy months, with the Macmillan nurse making sure everything was in place to make her time comfortable and worry free, mum was like her old self. ”

Mitch

When mum told us she wanted to move back to her own home, a two bed flat in north London, my second wife, Jane, and I moved in with her. We got her drug regime back on track, and for two wonderful, happy months, with the Macmillan nurse making sure everything was in place to make her time comfortable and worry free, mum was like her old self.

Then I got a call while I was out in the cab working. She'd fallen and cut her leg, and an ambulance took her into hospital. It was there that she told me: 'I've had enough. But don't leave me.' For two days and nights I stayed at her bedside while she slept. On the third night, I really needed to go home for a few hours to a bed and a bath. I checked with the staff who assured me it'd be okay to leave for a while.

But in the very early hours of the morning, I got a call to say I'd better come back. I got to the hospital to find she'd died. I was angry and upset, and it's taken a very long time to come to terms with not keeping my promise - I had left her. My stepfather had died in his own (hospital) room with 20 people around him and a smile on his face. I'd hoped for that death for my mum. It haunted me that it wasn't like that for her.

Has all this illness affected how I look after my own health?

I've never smoked; even before my father died I hated the smell of ashtrays.

A serious health scare last summer made me confront my own mortality. With all the family history of cancer I was convinced it was my turn, but, thankfully not this time, it turned out to be a gall bladder problem.

I'm now a firm believer in prevention, and annual check ups are part of that - blood tests, a PSA, liver function and bowel cancer tests.

I'm a huge believer in giving back to and raising funds for Macmillan...

So many of my relatives - my aunty Lorna, my aunty Miriam, my mum - had Macmillan support to make their living with, and their dying of cancer, so much easier for us all. It's as simple as 'they were there.'



Interview by Alison Davies

Information and support

If you've been through a similar experience to Mitch and have lost family members or loved ones to cancer, we can help. For answers, support or just a chat, call the Macmillan Support Line free on 0808 808 00 00, Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm.

- Find out more about caring for someone with cancer in our information section.
- Get answers to your questions about Macmillan nurses and find out others ways we can help you and your family.
- Learn more about lung cancer and whether the illness can run in families.
- Share your own experiences with people affected by cancer in our Online Community.