



## Hollyoaks Q&A

### MS Storyline

#### **What is Hollyoaks' new MS storyline?**

Hollyoaks is broadcasting a new storyline where one of their main characters, Nancy Osbourne, is diagnosed with relapsing MS. She has been experiencing a series of unexplained symptoms, including weakness tremor and spasms, since September 2016. This is the first time her condition will be made public.

The diagnosis episode will air on 19 January on E4 at 7pm, 20 January on C4 at 6:30pm and during the Sunday omnibus on C4 from 9am-12pm.

#### **Who is Nancy Osbourne?**

Played by Jessica Fox, Nancy is a young mum in her late 20s who has been involved in numerous main storylines since 2005. She is married to Darren Osbourne and is a deputy head teacher at Hollyoaks High.

#### **What happens in the episode on 19 January (E4)/20 January (C4)?**

Nancy visits the hospital with her partner Darren to receive her MRI results. She's told she has relapsing MS and is given a selection of our MS Society information booklets. The neurologist also says she'll have come back to discuss her treatment options.

Nancy and her partner struggle with the news. She worries about MS being really unpredictable and questions how she will take care of her children. The pair accepts that it will be difficult and decided to fight Nancy's MS together.

### The MS Society's involvement

#### **Has the MS Society been working with Hollyoaks on this storyline?**

Yes. The MS Society has been providing the script writers with information about MS. While we don't have complete control over how they use our information, our feedback has helped shape the storyline to better reflect the reality of living with MS.

#### **Why has the MS Society been helping with this storyline?**

We were contacted by the script writers about the story and agreed to get involved. We felt it was a great opportunity to raise awareness of MS amongst



the hundreds of thousands of people who tune into watch Hollyoaks every week. Many of them are at age when most people with MS first start experiencing symptoms.

We also want to provide accurate information about MS, so were keen to be involved to ensure the show reflects how the condition really affects people with MS and their families and friends.

**Nancy's symptoms/the storyline are really unrealistic. Why didn't the MS Society make sure they were shown realistically?**

Hollyoaks is also a soap opera, which means the events can be more dramatic and move along much more quickly than in real life.

The MS Society has continuously provided Hollyoaks with accurate information about MS and its symptoms as well as feeding back on scripts. We've also introduced the scriptwriters to people with MS who have shared their own experiences of the condition. But in the end, it's up to Hollyoaks to decide how they use our information and what's shown on screen.

**Why wasn't the MS Society or the MS helpline mentioned in the show?**

We asked, but Hollyoaks said it was against Channel 4's policy to feature our helpline at the end of the show. However, a selection of our information booklets were given to Nancy in the episode, and our website and helpline are listed on Hollyoaks' Help & Support page on the Channel 4 website.

## Diagnosis

**What should I do if I think I have MS?**

We encourage anyone who's worried about symptoms to visit their GP. They may be able to rule out some other possible causes of your symptoms. While GPs can't diagnose MS, if they suspect you may have MS they'll refer you to a neurologist who can.

**I've been diagnosed with MS and I'm finding it really difficult, who can I talk to?**

Being told that you have MS can have a huge emotional impact and involve a number of feelings from anger and denial to depression. The important thing to remember is that you're not alone.



We'd encourage anyone with MS, their families, friends and carers to contact the MS Society's free and confidential helpline – 0808 800 8000 – for information and support.

**I've think I have MS, but my doctor keeps dismissing my symptoms. Is there anything I can do?**

It can be stressful repeatedly going back to your doctor with unexplained symptoms and you may be made to feel that you are wasting their time and resources. But if symptoms are affecting you, you are entitled to help from the health and social care profession.

If you're not happy about what your doctor is saying, you can ask for a second opinion. You can find more information about how to do this on the NHS website or NHS Inform in Scotland.

**My doctor thinks I may have MS, but unlike Nancy, I have to wait to see a neurologist, what can I do?**

We know that getting an MS diagnosis can be a really frustrating process. And while Nancy was quick to see a specialist because everything moves more quickly in a soap opera, we know that getting a formal diagnosis can take several months and often even longer.

When your GP refers you to see a specialist, you can choose the hospital but waiting times can vary.

If you've already booked your appointment and you've been waiting longer than 18 weeks, you can complain to the hospital or provider. Ask them for details of how to make a complaint. This can be different depending on which nation you live in.

**I'm worried about my friend/family member, who has MS, what should I do?**

Living with an unpredictable and complex condition can be really difficult. If you're worried about someone's wellbeing and you feel you can, offer support and encourage them to talk about how they're feeling. You could also try suggesting they speak to their GP or MS nurse, or get in touch with our helpline on 0808 800 8000.

## Treatment

**I've struggled to get appointments with my neurologist/MS specialists, how was Nancy able to see one so quickly?**



We believe that people with MS should have fair and equal access to treatments whatever their situation, wherever they live. And while Nancy was quick to see a specialist because everything moves more quickly in a soap opera, we know this isn't happening for most people in reality.

That's why we're campaigning through our Treat Me Right campaign for everyone with MS to have regular reviews of treatment and care by MS specialists.

### **When Nancy was diagnosed she was given information about her treatment option, why didn't I?**

It's recommended that everyone with MS has a regular review of their treatment and care with an MS specialist every 12 months, but we know that access to treatment and specialists still varies greatly across the UK.

There are now 11 licensed disease modifying treatments (DMTs) available on the NHS for people with relapsing MS, and we're seeing really promising results of research into potential treatments, like ocrelizumab, for progressive MS.

We'd encourage people with all types of MS to speak to their neurologist or MS specialist about DMTs, other treatments for managing symptoms and their care options to make an active and informed choice about what is right for them.

### **Additional questions**

#### **What will happen next in the show?**

We can't say...as with all these storylines, they don't give anything away publicly in advance. You'll need to keep watching the show for updates on what happens with Nancy.

#### **General comments about having different experiences to Nancy**

MS is a very variable condition that's different for everyone. So it's likely that your experiences of symptoms, route to diagnosis or how family and friends have reacted to your condition may differ from Nancy's.

#### **How do I join the MS Society's campaigns community?**

You can get updates on our campaigns and important policy issues related to MS by signing up to our campaigns community [on our website](#).

Select the 'Get Involved' tab on the home page. On the 'Campaign' page you'll find a link to 'Join our team where you can enter your contact details.'



## Assisted dying

### **Did the MS Society help with writing the storyline where Nancy contemplates ending her own life?**

When Hollyoaks told us they were considering this storyline, we wanted to make sure the script writers understood how personal and difficult it is for people with MS to make decisions around end of life care.

We don't have control over how Hollyoaks uses our feedback or what's shown on screen. But we provided as much information as we could about MS and the impact it can have people's independence so that the storyline better reflects the reality of MS.

### **Nancy hasn't had symptoms for weeks and she's still able to run a family, have an active social life and work full-time. Having her consider taking her own life is offensive and insensitive.**

We absolutely recognise that Nancy feelings may not reflect everyone in the MS community. That's because people cope with MS differently, but there's no right or wrong way to feel.

Nancy is struggling with the uncertainty of how her MS will progress. And while she feels that assisted dying is worth considering, we know that people affected by MS hold a wide range of personal beliefs on the issue. Making decisions around end of life care is very difficult and personal.

### **What does the MS Society think about assisted dying? / Is the MS Society campaigning for the right to die in the UK?**

MS is a long-term condition; it is unpredictable and different for every person. Many are able to live a full life with manageable symptoms, while for others it causes severe, painful and debilitating symptoms which can have a crushing impact on their independence.

There is no simple answer as to whether assisted dying is right or wrong for those who live with MS. We also recognise that people affected by MS hold a wide range of personal beliefs on this issue, which is why we've chosen not to campaign either way.