

Cancer and work

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Introduction

A cancer diagnosis can have a significant impact on your life. There are many decisions to be made about treatment and how to deal with possible changes in your life. Cancer and work has been developed to provide practical information to assist you to continue working after a cancer diagnosis or return to work after an absence due to cancer and treatment. Information is provided for:

- employees who have been diagnosed with cancer
- employers of people who have been diagnosed with cancer
- self-employed people who have been diagnosed with cancer
- employees who work with someone who has been diagnosed with cancer
- carers of people who have been diagnosed with cancer.

Cancer and work contains practical information to help with communication and assistance in the workplace including useful information to assist in starting conversations about modifying the work environment to allow continued work through treatment or in assisting a return to work after an absence.

The information on this website is general in nature and is not intended to replace advice from your Human Resources department, legal or financial advisor or your health care team.

Talking to your health team

If you have been diagnosed with cancer you may be worried about how your working life will be affected. You may have many questions and it is important to seek information from your doctor and health care team about the impact of your cancer diagnosis and treatment.

Seeking information

Being well informed can help you to make decisions right for your situation. It will help you to plan if and how you will approach your employer. Information that may be useful for your health care team includes:

- Particular hours, duties and responsibilities within your job.
- How long you have worked for your employer.
- The nature of your work relationships. Do you work in a team or independently? Is your workplace casual or more formal?
- Have any work colleagues been through similar circumstances? How did your workplace support them?

Questions to ask your doctor

Prepare and write questions down before an appointment so that you feel comfortable asking them. Take a family member or friend with you as this can assist in recalling the conversation and help in further discussion. You can take notes if you wish. Examples of questions you may like to ask:

- Can I still work while having treatment?
- How will the cancer, treatment and side effects affect my ability to do my job?
- Will I need to take time off work? How long will I need?
- Can my treatment be scheduled to reduce the impact on my work?
- What support might my employer provide for me?
- Can I have a medical certificate for reduced work hours or time off?

For more information call Cancer Council [13 11 20](tel:131120) or you can download the brochure [Questions you might like to ask your doctor](#).

Self-employment and cancer

The decisions you make about your working life during treatment will depend entirely on your personal circumstances—so if you are self-employed and rely upon your income, taking time off or leaving work permanently may be a major concern. If you are uncertain about what to do seek professional financial advice.

Managing your business

If you have been diagnosed with cancer you may be worried how your working life will be affected. Having a sound business plan is one way to cope with cancer and treatment while you keep your business running. Ask your health care team for advice and the information you need about the expected impact of your cancer and treatment.

Depending on your situation, it is possible your treatment and appointments can be timed to reduce the impact on your work commitments.

Your family, friends and others who know your business and situation can be valuable sources of support and advice about how much work you can handle. These suggestions may be of help:

- be realistic about your health and how much work you can continue to do
- prioritise essential commitments and consider putting off any optional responsibilities
- consider sub-contracting or hiring temporary staff
- ask for or accept any offers of help from family and friends
- consider working from home or changing your role
- aim to complete any high priority work before your treatment starts
- establish clear processes and records in case you choose to let someone take over
- if you are a member of a professional association contact them for advice
- check any existing insurance policies for entitlements.

Clients and customers

You may be worried that your cancer or treatment will interfere with your ability to meet deadlines, maintain contact with clients and work at your previous capacity. Telling your clients about your cancer is your choice, based on your personal circumstances. Decide what and how much to disclose and how your business will continue to meet ongoing commitments.

Talking to your employer about cancer, treatment and support

“Should I tell my employer that I have cancer?”

Telling your employer that you have cancer is your decision. Legally you should tell your employer if your cancer or treatment may be a health and safety risk to yourself or to others, or will affect your ability to do the essential requirements of your job. However you do not have to give details of your cancer and treatment.

If you tell your employer, they are required to provide ‘reasonable adjustments’ for you to do your job. ‘Reasonable adjustments’ are those that will not cause ‘unjustifiable hardship’ to the business.

Your employer may be able to receive financial support for these adjustments. They can obtain information from JobAccess, an Australian Government initiative that provides support to employers when employees have a disability from illness or injury including cancer. They can visit jobaccess.gov.au or call [1800 464 800](tel:1800464800) for more information.

Good reasons for disclosing your illness

Disclosure can build trust and allow you to discuss the support you may need. In addition:

- you can work with your employer to address possible misunderstandings in the workplace
- adjustments can be made if your needs change
- if your employer does not know about your cancer and your work is affected, this may be seen as poor work performance
- if the effects of your cancer or treatment are a health and safety risk for you or your colleagues, not telling your employer may be a breach of your obligations under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2012*.

“What are my rights regarding privacy and disclosure?”

Telling your employer about your cancer or treatment does not mean that your colleagues need to know. Your employer needs your consent to share information about your illness with others, unless otherwise authorised or required by law such as if your cancer or treatment effects may pose a health and safety risk to yourself or to others.

Your employer can call Cancer Council [13 11 20](tel:131120) or they can download the booklet [Cancer, work and you](#).

“What should I tell my employer?”

You only need to tell your employer about anything that may impact upon your ability to work or cause a health and safety risk. If you want to keep the details you disclose to a minimum you may want to consider these points:

- if you want to continue to work at all or in your current role and workplace
- your particular cancer diagnosis, prognosis and how your cancer may affect you at work

- the expected course of treatment and how this may affect you at work
- if you need time off and how much leave you have available
- any work adjustments you may need
- if you want other people in your workplace to know or not.

You can also talk to your employer about whether you plan to tell your colleagues and how you might do this. You may prefer to have your employer talk to colleagues first or you may wish to arrange to do this yourself.

“How can my employer support me?”

If you cannot perform your usual duties at work, your employer is required to provide you with reasonable assistance so that you can continue to work, even if you need time off for treatment providing that it doesn't cause financial hardship to the business. Employers can access advice, financial and practical assistance to provide you with supportive adjustments at [JobAccess Australia](#) or by calling [1800 464 800](tel:1800464800).

It can be useful to prepare a plan with your employer about how you may be able to continue to work. You may want to offer some ideas for possible adjustments. Your health care team may be able to give you advice. There are a number of adjustments that can be made in your workplace including:

- additional breaks
- temporary modifications to duties with employee/employer agreement
- adjustments to the workspace including access, chairs, desks and counters
- telephone typewriter (TTY) access, voice-activated software, telephone headsets, screen-reading software
- reduction of hours, flexi-time, working from home, part-time work or a gradual return to work.

Your employer is obligated to make reasonable adjustments unless it will result in 'unjustifiable hardship' to the organisation.

“I am concerned about discrimination.”

Discrimination in the workplace due to cancer and treatment is rare but it is important to know your rights as well as your employer's responsibilities. For guidance relating to your particular case, contact the relevant government advisory groups. Contact information is available in the Cancer and work booklet. Visit www.cancersa.org.au or call

or a copy of the booklet.

The *Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1984* protects employees in South Australia from:

- less favourable treatment than other employees
- requirements, conditions or practices that are less favourable to you
- harassment and prejudice.

Talking to your colleagues about your cancer

It is your decision if you want to tell your colleagues about your cancer and treatment. Many people find that social and practical support from co-workers is very valuable. You may be worried that your colleagues will think differently about you or will not be understanding. It can be difficult to answer questions or talk about your illness to many different people.

“Should I tell my colleagues?”

Not telling your colleagues may lead to anxiety or confusion. You don't need to tell everyone yourself. You may choose to ask your supervisor, a close colleague or your HR manager to speak to them for you.

You may want to assess how your news might be received. You can discuss this with your manager or supervisor who will need to be informed first. Points worth considering are:

- the type of workplace, friendly and close-knit or more formal and business-focused
- the types of relationships you have with others
- who your closest friends are, both within and outside the work environment
- who you feel is most trustworthy with both personal and professional matters
- if there has been a previous instance of cancer in the workplace and how was it received.

Tell people that are likely to be supportive first. They may help you talk to others. Try to find a comfortable and private time and place to talk. Sharing with close colleagues may give them a better sense of how they can support you.

“What about my colleagues’ reactions?”

If a person has had a past experience with cancer, either personally or someone they know, it can affect their reactions.

If your colleagues do not know that you have cancer, their reactions to any workplace changes during your treatment may not be as understanding as you would like. It may be harder for your colleagues to support you.

Talking about cancer at work

Plan how and when you will keep colleagues informed. Colleagues may ask how you might be affected at work and if you will take leave. People may want to know if and how they can help you. Colleagues may want to support you but may not know how to help. Be honest about the kind of support and help you need and prepare them for any potential changes.

You can ask a trusted colleague to be a first point of contact; this can be useful if you need to take leave. They may be able to answer questions in your absence.

Changing jobs

Cancer could mean that a change of job may be desirable or necessary. For some people, returning to the same job may not be possible due to changes in ability or length of time away. The desire to reduce work related stress or to pursue a different type of job may also be a driving factor.

Changing your job

Some points you may want to consider:

- what skills and interests will transfer over to a new position or field?
- do I need extra education or training? Can I put aside a job to study?
- is there a market for people with my experience in my new chosen field?
- would I be happy with a lower-level position or fewer hours?
- how would I manage the stress of a change in employment?

A career counsellor can help guide you through these decisions. Career counsellors are available at [JobAccess](#) or by calling them on [1800 464 800](tel:1800464800). Assistance may also be available through [Centrelink](#) or by calling them on [13 27 17](tel:132717).

Discuss your options with former colleagues, your manager and referees who are familiar with your work and can be honest about your skills.

Cancer and treatment does not make you less qualified for a job that you may have done before. If reasonable adjustments can help you do the job, you are still qualified.

“What should I tell a potential employer?”

New employers do not need to know about your cancer or treatment unless it may impact upon your ability to do the job.

You do not need to explain why you cannot perform a particular task; you may prefer to leave your explanation as “a health related issue”.

“I am worried about how long I have been away from work.”

If you have taken extended time off work for treatment or recovery, you may be worried that you will be asked to explain your time away. If you are asked, you only need to give relevant details, you are not required to disclose your cancer and treatment. Keep your answer general, you could say that you have resolved health issues or took time off for a career break.

“I am worried about discrimination.”

Employment cannot be refused on the basis of cancer or treatment. It can be difficult to prove cases of discrimination. If you believe that you have been treated unfairly, you can make a complaint with your employer, the [Fair Work Ombudsman](#) phone [13 13 94](#) or the [Equal Opportunity Commission of South Australia](#) or phone [08 8207 1977](#) freecall [1800 188 163](#) for outside metropolitan areas.

Talking to an employee with cancer

Communication is the starting point for supporting your employee as well as managing your business effectively when an employee has cancer or a serious illness. Find out what your employee needs and assist them with a plan to continue or return to work. Reassure your employee that you will work together to find the best course of action for their situation. Your employee may feel more confident if you can communicate with them confidently and compassionately as well as providing them with information about how you can support them.

Your employee may ask you to tell others about their situation or they may ask you to keep their diagnosis and treatment private. This request must be respected. You need consent from your employee before you notify others, unless otherwise authorised or required by law such as if your cancer or treatment effects may pose a health and safety risk to yourself or to others.

“What do I say?”

Give your employee emotional support by being an empathic and attentive listener without dismissing the severity of a cancer diagnosis.

Your relationship with your employee need not change. Talking to your employee in the same way that you did previously can help to maintain a sense of normality. Suggestions for communication are:

- speak in your office or find a private place where you can talk to your employee
- schedule regular meetings to keep up to date with how they are managing their work and to make sure that support provided by the organisation continues to be appropriate
- show empathy without saying things like ‘everything will be okay’ or ‘I’m sure you’ll be fine’
- let your employee control the conversation; listen without agreeing or disagreeing
- respond clearly to their questions
- avoid offering advice or false assurance; even if you have past experience with cancer
- don’t ask for specific details, but do ask for clarification of the points they raise
- don’t dismiss your employee’s emotions.

Maintaining communication and support

If your employee needs to take time off, offer to keep in contact during leave if you feel it is appropriate. Keeping in contact can also show your employee that you are willing to provide support upon their return. If your employee is taking time off, communicate your concern for their health and well-being as well as your support.

If you feel it is appropriate, you can let your employee know that you are available to talk about any workplace issues.

How to support an employee with cancer

Employee disclosure

An employee is only legally required to disclose their cancer or treatment to you if it will have an impact on their ability to undertake the required tasks of their role, or cause a safety risk to themselves or others.

Once a diagnosis has been disclosed, it is the employer's responsibility to provide reasonable support and adjustments for an employee to continue to do their job.

“How can I provide support?”

Your ability to offer support may be affected by the size and type of your business. [JobAccess on 1800 464 800](#) can provide advice and assistance for supporting staff as well as financial help. Suggestions on how you can begin to provide support include:

- a return to work plan for how work duties are to be managed
- reassure your employee that you will work together to find the best course of action
- ask your employee what they can manage. This may change gradually or suddenly
- ask your employee what they might need to make their work more manageable
- suggest regular meeting times to keep up with any changes in their need for support
- ask your employee if they want to keep their diagnosis private—this is up to them
- help your employee by finding out how much leave they can take.

There are several work adjustments you could provide that will help your employee continue working and cope with the demands of their treatment. These include:

- a private place to make calls to specialists and doctors
- additional breaks to deal with cancer and treatment effects
- equipment to aid with carrying and lifting if required
- adjustable height workspace including chairs, desks and counters
- assuring access to premises for aids such as crutches and wheelchairs
- adjustments to telephones and computers (telephone typewriter, screen reading software, headsets)
- allowing part-time work or flexi-time.

You may be worried about how the news will affect your other employees. Cancer Council SA can provide information and support to you and your employees as well as put you in contact with other relevant organisations. Call Cancer Council [13 11 20](#).

Talking to a colleague with cancer

Work can be a valuable part of cancer recovery. Creating a supportive environment for your colleague is one of the most effective ways to assist them returning to and remaining at work.

“How can I help?”

Not knowing what to say is normal. Your colleague is the same person that they were before. They may be emotional or tired due to stress and their treatments. Try to be understanding and patient.

Supportive colleagues can ease the burden of physical and mental workloads, a lack of confidence due to time away and treatment side effects. Showing your support can be as simple as attempting to maintain the same relationship you had before they were diagnosed.

Some people may want to go on as if nothing has changed. Others may appreciate more regular communication. Let them guide the level of communication they feel comfortable with. You could let them know that you are happy to talk if and when needed. If you feel uncomfortable, you can be honest about this. Here are some ideas to help you communicate with your colleague:

- call or send a card if your colleague is away from work
- talk to them about how you can support them
- offer to help with specific tasks such as heavy lifting or errands
- avoid offering advice or false assurance; even if you have past experience with cancer
- if you feel comfortable, allow your colleague to discuss their cancer and treatment openly
- don't always make cancer and treatment the main topic of conversation
- keep your colleague in the loop with workplace chat and discussions. This can be a good distraction for them
- make sure they are still invited to out-of-hours work related events and social occasions
- offer to drive them to appointments or help with meals.

Cancer and treatment can vary and its effects may change or last longer than initially planned. Some side effects of treatment last for a long time and the duration of treatment itself may be longer (or shorter) than expected. Try to be understanding if your colleague does not recover as quickly as first expected.

Research has shown that a supportive environment at work helps people cope with ongoing symptoms and makes it more likely that they will remain at work. Be supportive of a gradual return to a full workload, even if your colleague insists that they will be able to handle an immediate return to a normal workload and schedule.

Being a carer while working

When someone you know has been diagnosed with cancer, it is likely that you will have a number of both practical and emotional concerns, both for yourself and the person with cancer. Caring for someone is rewarding but can also be physically, psychologically, emotionally and financially challenging. Having a workplace that recognises the needs of carers is important.

Working while caring

If you are employed and you think that your work could be affected by your role as a carer, take some time to talk to your employer or Human Resources Department.

Let your employer know about your additional responsibilities and any support you may need.

Your employer must not discriminate against you because of your caring role. However if you have not told them, you may not be protected from unfair dismissal. Unless you are a casual employee, you may be entitled to paid carer's leave as well as unpaid compassionate leave.

Support for carers

You may need to take leave from work or stop working for some time. Adjustments to your hours may also be possible. Flexible work arrangements, or flexi-time, may be discussed with your employer.

You may wish to seek information about the award or agreement covering your job and find out about your minimum entitlements under your award.

You may want to refer your employer and colleagues to Cancer Council [13 11 20](https://www.cancersa.org.au) for fact sheets that provide information about supporting someone affected by cancer to continue or return to work or [Carers Australia SA](https://www.carersaustralia.org.au) or calling [1800 242 636](https://www.carersaustralia.org.au).

Protection for carers

The *Equal Opportunity Act 1984* in South Australia supports employees with caring responsibilities. The Act provides carers with legal protection from discrimination. If you feel that you are being discriminated against because of your caring duties, contact the [Equal Opportunity Commission of South Australia](https://www.eoc.sa.gov.au) or [08 8207 1977](https://www.eoc.sa.gov.au). Cancer Council [13 11 20](https://www.cancersa.org.au) may also be able to provide contact information of organisations that may assist you including legal assistance.

Useful resources

Practical and support information fact sheets - Workplace series

[Cancer: an overview](#)

[Cancer myths and facts](#)

[Talking to your employee about cancer](#)

[Managing the effects of treatment](#)

[Creating cancer-friendly workplaces](#)

[Supporting a colleague with cancer](#)

[Supporting working carers](#)

[Death and bereavement](#)

[Cancer in the workplace: other support](#)

Other resources

[Cancer, work and you](#)

workaftercancer.com.au

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