

Talking to your employee about cancer

A guide for managers and human resource professionals

As a manager, your first conversation with an employee about their cancer can feel daunting. You will probably be concerned for their wellbeing and conscious of the need to balance the employee's needs and rights with the needs of the organisation. This fact sheet provides some suggestions about how to approach this conversation, what to expect and how to talk about cancer.

Choosing a time and place

As with any serious conversation, it is important to find a private, comfortable place where you won't be distracted or interrupted by other people, computers or phones. Make sure you allow plenty of time so you can give the conversation your full attention.

Keep in mind that your employee may find it upsetting to talk about the diagnosis. Try to find a setting where you are not in view of other people. Avoid the temptation to have a quick chat in the corridor or kitchen. If the employee doesn't seem up to talking, suggest making another time for the conversation.

Preparing for the conversation

If you have some notice of the conversation with the employee, it is worth investing some time in preparing for it so that it is as comfortable and constructive as possible.

It is important to become familiar with your organisation's relevant policies and legal obligations before the meeting. For example, you may wish to refer to your duty of care obligations, leave provisions, return to work policies, flexible working policies, and details of any Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Some organisations may have a specific policy or best practice guidelines about managing employees

with a chronic illness. The human resources team should also be able to provide some guidance and perhaps tell you how other managers have handled similar situations (without revealing specific details).

It may not be appropriate to discuss all of these issues in the initial meeting. Depending on how the conversation unfolds, you may decide to arrange a follow-up meeting with your employee.

Communicating well

People communicate in different ways, so you will need to tailor your approach to the individual employee and situation. Some people will be open about their situation, while others will be more private.

Be aware that an employee may be reluctant to discuss details of the cancer for a range of reasons. For example, the person might:

- be worried about possible consequences of being open about the diagnosis – some people may fear losing their jobs or having their hours cut
- want to keep personal information private
- still be making decisions about treatment
- have particular cultural beliefs about cancer
- be uncomfortable because of a gender difference – for instance, a male employee may not wish to discuss his prostate cancer with a female manager.

Be sensitive and let your employee guide the conversation. Ask what they need from you and the workplace right now. Reassure them that the conversation can be kept confidential, although you will need to let human resources know about any leave requirements. Let the employee know they cannot be dismissed because of the cancer diagnosis and that you will work with them to make any reasonable adjustments to the workplace so that they can still carry out the essential parts of their job. (The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* applies to all workers whether casual, permanent or part-time.)

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The importance of listening

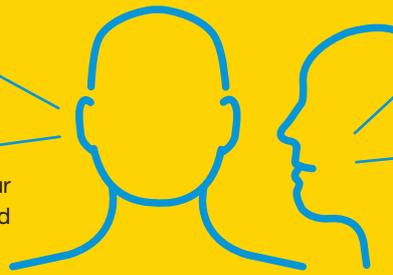
In the initial conversation, keep the focus on the employee – you will probably do more listening than talking. Listening will help you learn more about your employee's situation. People affected by cancer often say that the best thing other people can do is listen.

Pay close attention

to what the employee is saying without interrupting.

Use active listening skills

Acknowledge what is being said. Let your employee know that you are listening and encourage them to continue by nodding and saying "yes" or "I see".



Show empathy

by using a phrase such as "I can imagine you have a lot on your mind right now".

Answer any questions

as clearly and thoroughly as possible. If you don't know the answer, tell the person that you don't know but will find out and get back to them.

Issues to discuss

You may want to clarify:

- whether the employee wants their colleagues to know about the diagnosis and, if so, whether they would like your help to pass on the news
- whether the employee is aware of their leave entitlements and accrued balance
- what time off the employee is likely to need for treatment and recovery, and whether they wish to continue working during treatment
- whether the employee requires any adjustments to their duties, workspace or hours
- whether you need to set up a handover meeting to discuss upcoming appointments and tasks.

If you work in human resources, you may also want to discuss whether the employee would like your help letting their manager know about the diagnosis.

Don't feel that you have to agree on everything in the first meeting. You may both need to get more information and think through decisions.

At the end of the meeting, it can be helpful to summarise any key points or concerns the employee has raised, so that you both have a clear understanding of the situation.

“ The support from my employer helped me to keep engaged and get back to work when I was able. ” *Kristen*

After the conversation

- Be mindful of the employee's right to privacy and do not disclose their situation to anyone unless permission has been given.
- If you have the employee's permission, provide human resources (or the person in your organisation who deals with personnel matters) with an overview of the situation and with any documentation provided by the employee.
- If you have not already done so, ask human resources whether there are any other special leave provisions or other assistance available.
- If your employee had questions about their work arrangements that you were unable to answer, follow up with human resources or your employment adviser, and get back to your employee with the information as soon as possible.
- Follow through with any commitments you make – for example, you may have agreed to inform colleagues or to look into flexible working arrangements.
- Make a file note of the conversation and send an email to your employee setting out any agreed changes to working arrangements.
- Set a time for a follow-up meeting to discuss outstanding issues, assess how things are going and decide whether any further action is needed.

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Tips for talking with your employee

- Be sensitive to your employee’s feelings and follow their lead.
- Recognise your employee’s right to privacy.
- Listen to and acknowledge your employee.
- Know your organisation’s policies and leave entitlements.
- Consider what reasonable adjustments you can make to the employee’s working arrangements.
- Be prepared to be flexible. Your employee may not know how treatment will affect them and side effects may change over time.
- Be mindful of any cultural considerations that may affect your discussion.
- Avoid sharing stories about other people with cancer you may have known.
- Don’t say that everything will be okay, because you don’t know that it will.
- Avoid telling the employee to ‘be positive’. While well intentioned, this can place additional pressure on the person to always show a happy face, no matter what they are going through.

Where to get help and information

- **Workplace fact sheets** – *Cancer: an overview, Managing the effects of treatment and Creating cancer-friendly workplaces*. These online only fact sheets are available from your local Cancer Council website.
- **Call Cancer Council 13 11 20** – for more information about cancer in the workplace. You can also ask for free copies of our booklets, or download digital copies from your local Cancer Council website.
- **Fair Work Ombudsman** – fairwork.gov.au; 13 13 94
- **Australian Human Rights Commission** – humanrights.gov.au; 1300 656 419

Cancer Council websites

ACT.....	actcancer.org
NSW	cancercouncil.com.au
NT.....	nt.cancer.org.au
Queensland.....	cancerqld.org.au
SA.....	cancersa.org.au
Tasmania	cancertas.org.au
Victoria	cancervic.org.au
WA.....	cancerwa.asn.au
Australia	cancer.org.au

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Note to reader

Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and is not a substitute for professional medical, legal or financial advice. Information about cancer is constantly being updated and revised by the medical and research communities. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Cancer Council Australia and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided in this fact sheet.



For information and support on cancer-related issues, call Cancer Council 13 11 20. This is a confidential service.