

Creating cancer-friendly workplaces

A guide for managers and human resource professionals

Workplaces are an important source of support for many people with cancer. There are sound business reasons for supporting employees with cancer and their carers to continue working or to return to work following treatment.

Developing policies to support an employee with a serious illness or carer's responsibilities provides managers and employees with a framework for creating a supportive work environment for people affected by cancer.

Every workplace is different and certain initiatives will be easier to implement in some workplaces than in others. The ideas in this fact sheet are intended to provide a starting point, and we encourage you to consult with your staff and be creative.

Impact of cancer on the workplace

When an employee is diagnosed with cancer, there are a range of physical, practical and emotional impacts on the person, their colleagues and the workplace that need to be managed.

It is important to create a workplace culture that supports employees undergoing cancer treatment, addresses barriers that prevent employees returning to work after treatment, and supports working carers.

Providing a supportive environment during an illness can help build team morale, encourage greater organisational loyalty and foster a positive image of the organisation. Recruitment can also be a time-consuming and expensive process, and there are clear benefits in retaining skills, expertise and corporate knowledge.

Developing and communicating clear policies

Employers have a general duty of care to all employees, underpinned by law, to ensure their health and safety.


Your workplace may already have policies, operating procedures or guidelines in place that address the issues arising from managing employees affected by a serious illness such as cancer.

If not, you may want to develop such tools. This will help ensure that your employees feel able to talk with their managers about their health issues and any workplace adjustments that might be necessary to help them continue to work or return to work.

The box on the next page includes some areas for you to consider when developing a policy that covers employees affected by cancer. This is a general guide only. When developing your organisation's policy you may also find it helpful to refer to peak industry bodies, consultants, unions, employees, line managers and other relevant people, organisations and guidelines.

You should also ensure that your recruitment policies and procedures do not discriminate against people who are seeking work after cancer. The focus of recruitment should be on the applicant's ability to do the job.

Once you have a policy, let employees know that it exists and make it easily accessible.



Remember that everyone's experience of cancer will be different. Support that is tailored to the individual employee's unique situation will be the most effective.

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Your policy should cover:

- guiding principles for managers – for example, to create a flexible, understanding and supportive workplace that encourages employees to discuss their personal needs with their managers
- leave entitlements – paid and unpaid, including any additional leave your organisation offers beyond the minimum statutory entitlements
- flexible working arrangements – what they are and how to access them
- the organisation's legal obligations – for example, under the *Commonwealth Fair Work Act 2009* and *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, as well as any state or territory workplace health and safety or discrimination laws
- zero tolerance for discrimination or harassment of any employee with cancer or who is a carer
- workplace support strategies, such as those described in this fact sheet
- guidelines for communicating with employees during treatment and/or while they are absent from the workplace
- statutory rights and obligations of employees
- where to access information on cancer
- information about cancer-related issues, including an appreciation of the importance of work to many people with cancer and carers
- the roles of return to work coordinators, human resource staff, employee health staff, and/or external professionals such as counsellors, psychologists or Employee Assistance Program (EAP) personnel
- how to balance support for the affected employee and their rights with potential impacts on colleagues
- privacy obligations, including guidelines for communicating the news to colleagues
- awareness and management of impacts on colleagues and team members
- support, education and training for managers
- promotion of healthy lifestyle choices to support prevention of cancer and other chronic diseases.

Providing practical support to employees having treatment

Employees who continue working during their cancer treatment can face some particular challenges. Many need to take some time off work to have treatment or deal with side effects, such as fatigue or nausea, as well as mental exhaustion. There are many practical things that employers can do to make it a little easier for an employee to continue to work while receiving treatment. Here are just a few.

Facilitate flexible working arrangements

Enabling employees to change their work hours to accommodate medical appointments and treatment can be extremely helpful. This can also reduce the amount of leave they would otherwise need to take. For example, if an employee can come to work early and leave early, he or she may be able to schedule treatment after work. Of course, what is possible in terms of flexibility will vary between workplaces and jobs.

Some employees may find it easier to work from home to facilitate rest breaks, for example, or to avoid a tiring commute. If an employee is working from home, remember to keep in regular contact and be mindful of workplace health and safety considerations.

Other employees may find that temporarily moving their workstations can be helpful. For example, a quieter location might be beneficial for an employee who is struggling to concentrate, while a ground floor location can help someone who finds climbing the stairs a challenge.

Temporarily adjust workload

To make it easier for an employee to work during treatment, you could adjust project deadlines, change the nature of tasks for a while (for example, by reducing or eliminating physically demanding tasks), or temporarily reallocate some work to other employees. Talk to your employee about what would help and work out a plan together.

Offer additional leave

Some organisations are able to offer additional paid or unpaid sick leave to employees undergoing cancer treatment, which can help relieve some of the financial burdens associated with cancer.

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Access to parking

Many people having cancer treatment experience fatigue and commuting can be one more factor that contributes to overall exhaustion. Short-term access to parking close to your workplace may make it easier for the person to attend work. It may also be convenient if the employee has to come and go during the day to attend medical appointments.

Provide a quiet place to nap

An employee's fatigue may be alleviated by a short nap or rest in a quiet place. For an employer, this can be as simple as providing a comfortable chair in a quiet room, such as an unused office or screened section of a staff common area. It is best not to locate this in an existing sick bay, because treatment may make the person with cancer more susceptible to infectious illnesses.

Access to counselling

Some people find it helpful to talk with a counsellor or psychologist after they receive their diagnosis, during their treatment and/or when they are returning to work. Many Employee Assistance Programs offer a confidential counselling service, or you could engage an independent professional counsellor who specialises in cancer-related issues and can attend your workplace.

Encourage other employees to stay home when ill

People undergoing cancer treatment often have lower immunity, so they are especially vulnerable to other illnesses. Exposure to a cold or tummy bug may make them very ill.

Promote understanding of cancer among colleagues

Providing access to accurate information about cancer can help dispel fear. Encourage colleagues to be supportive.

Help employees find information and support

Cancer Council and other cancer organisations provide a range of information and support services. You can help employees access these by listing the Cancer Council number (13 11 20) on your organisation's intranet or staff notice board and providing a link to Cancer Council's website.

Stay in touch

An employee taking extended sick leave for treatment can sometimes feel isolated. Regular contact from a manager or nominated colleague can help the employee stay connected to the workplace. This can make them feel valued and included, and more likely to return to work. Check with your employee about how often they would like to hear from you and their preferred method of communication.

Ensure that employees know what support is available

An employee with cancer will have many things on their mind, so make it as easy as possible to find out what support is available in your workplace. In addition to the support your organisation has in place, consider other assistance that may be available, such as superannuation policies with automatic income protection insurance.

Supporting an employee returning to work after treatment

Returning to work after treatment for cancer can be difficult and some people will find it too hard. Setting up policies and procedures to support people returning to work will help you retain valuable staff and corporate knowledge. There are many practical things that employers can do to make it a little easier for an employee to return to work after treatment.

Develop a return to work plan

A human resource professional within your organisation or an external workplace rehabilitation consultant can liaise with the employee and their manager to develop a written return to work plan. This can be very helpful in clarifying the expectations of all parties and will make the transition smoother.

Assess the workspace

Cancer may cause physical changes to a person's body. These changes may be permanent or last for a while after treatment ends. Some changes are visible – the loss of a limb, for example – while others may be less so, such as a loss of strength, diminished vision, or difficulty sitting, standing or

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reaching. When an employee returns to work, an ergonomic assessment of the work environment can help ensure that it is suitable and safe for their current physical state. It is helpful to schedule periodic assessments to allow for future changes (such as improved flexibility or strength).

Arrange a buddy system

A workplace buddy system involves teaming the employee affected by cancer with a colleague who has been through a similar experience, and is willing to provide support and advice about returning to work. It is important to establish clear guidelines about the system, how it will operate, and where the buddy can find help with their role. Remember that not everyone wants to share their experience and a buddy system should be optional for both parties.

Facilitate a gradual return to work

For some employees who have been on extended sick leave, a gradual return to work (such as starting off with reduced hours and building up to their normal hours) can help them readjust, manage their fatigue and regain confidence.

Sanitary and hazardous waste disposal

Some people who have undergone treatment for particular types of cancer, such as prostate cancer, may experience a loss of continence and may need to wear incontinence pads. Providing a suitable disposal system in both male and female bathrooms is a simple initiative that could save someone a great deal of embarrassment. If an employee is having chemotherapy at work – for example, through a chemotherapy pump – their medical team can advise how any hazardous materials can be returned to the hospital for disposal.

Access to disabled bathroom facilities

Ensure that there are appropriate toilet facilities available, especially if the employee is using crutches or a wheelchair.

Where to get help and information

- **Workplace fact sheets** – *Talking to your employee about cancer, Managing the effects of treatment and Supporting working carers.* 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 *Understanding Radiotherapy, Understanding Chemotherapy and Understanding Surgery* 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.