

# Supporting a co-worker with cancer

*A guide for co-workers*

The news that someone you work with has been diagnosed with cancer can be a shock. It's common to feel a variety of emotions – from disbelief, fear and anxiety, to concern or sadness. It may be even more confronting if you, or someone close to you, has had cancer. This fact sheet has information to help you support your co-worker after their cancer diagnosis.

## Communicating with a co-worker

Most people diagnosed with cancer appreciate the concern and support of their co-workers. While some are comfortable talking about their diagnosis, others might prefer not to talk about it at all. Try to notice if your co-worker is openly talking about the cancer to you or not. If you're unsure whether to talk with them about it, you could ask a manager or other co-worker if they know what the person prefers.

It's common to feel awkward, helpless, or afraid of saying the wrong thing. See page 2 for some examples of things you could say and what to avoid.



## Ways to help at work

Treat the person with cancer as normally as possible and avoid smothering them with concern. You can ask if they prefer you to check in about the cancer regularly or just to wait until they bring up the topic.

If you're not sure of the best way to support your co-worker, ask a manager or consider these ideas.

### Offer to cover some tasks

You could volunteer your help if the manager needs to redistribute some of your co-worker's usual workload. Arrange with the co-worker or your team to discuss any appointments or upcoming tasks.

### Be understanding about health issues

Treatment, side effects and the cancer itself can change how your co-worker feels and acts. They may feel tired, sick or find it difficult to concentrate.

Try to be patient and understanding if they can't work as efficiently or in the same way as before. Keep in mind that side effects may continue or begin months or years after treatment ends. Medications may also affect their ability or mood – and may need to be taken after treatment ends too.

### Stay home or keep your distance if sick

If you have a cold, flu, COVID-19, RSV or contagious illness, stay away from your co-worker and talk to your manager about whether you should be in the workplace. People having some types of cancer treatment may be more susceptible to infections.

### Volunteer to be a buddy or mentor

If you have experienced cancer yourself (and feel up to it), you could offer to be a workplace buddy or mentor for your co-worker.

## Talking to a co-worker with cancer

### Ways to help



Ask your co-worker *“Do you mind me talking about the cancer and how you are feeling?”* and respect their answer.

If the co-worker is away from work and you're unsure if they want to talk, you could say, *“I have been thinking of you. Please get in touch when you're up to it and if you want to.”*

Make time to listen. Your colleague may appreciate the opportunity to talk about their feelings, fears, treatment, side effects, finances or other concerns. If they are upset or crying, just listen – you don't need to cheer them up.

Now and then, ask a general question like, *“How are things for you today?”* rather than anything probing or personal.

Ask the person if it's okay before you share details of their health with people. Otherwise, keep the news confidential.

Try to treat your co-worker as you usually would, and try to chat about other things happening in both your lives.

If you don't feel comfortable talking about the cancer, you can show you care with a small gesture, like sending a card.

Ask if the co-worker needs any practical help at work or, if it is appropriate, at home.

### What to avoid



Don't ask questions about lifestyle choices, such as smoking or being sunsafe. You might assume that the cancer was caused by your co-worker's lifestyle choices, but that is often not the case. And no-one deserves cancer.

Don't ask if someone has had their regular check-ups. For example, don't ask if a colleague with bowel, prostate or breast cancer had any regular screening checks.

Avoid sharing stories about other people with cancer who you may know. Everyone's situation is different.

Offering advice about your co-worker's treatment or choices is not helpful unless they ask for your opinion.

Avoid talking about “fighting cancer” or a “health battle”. This may make people feel like they're losing or that they have to appear strong all the time.

Don't comment on how your co-worker looks – even if you were planning on being positive. This may make the person feel self-conscious.

Avoid clichés or unrealistic assurances like “don't worry”, “be positive” or “you'll be okay”. This can sound like you're being dismissive of how the person may be feeling.

*“What would you like me to do for you?  
Can I do the grocery shopping?”*



### How can I help?

You may want to help, but don't know what to do. And the person with cancer may be uncomfortable asking for help. These are some ways that you can offer or show your support.

#### Staying in touch

Cancer can be isolating, so your co-worker may appreciate hearing from you during their time off. Even if you don't know what to say, they may still need someone to listen. Ask them if they want to be kept up to date with work and social events. Consider nominating a contact person to keep in touch with them with good wishes and information to and from the co-worker. Or you could start a group chat with people the co-worker is happy to share with.



- Send a card or flowers.
- Phone, message, email or use direct messaging to make contact and stay in touch.
- Visit your co-worker in hospital or at home (ask if it's okay first).
- Catch up over a weekly coffee if your co-worker feels up to it.
- Continue to include your co-worker in social events – even if they aren't well enough to come, it's nice to be asked and it will help them to stay in touch.
- Be sensitive to your co-worker's situation and privacy in any communications you have.

#### Practical ways to help

People often say, "Let me know if I can do anything to help". But it can still feel awkward for the person with cancer to ask for something specific. Instead make an offer like, "Would it help if I get the groceries?" or "Do you need me to drive you?". This also allows the person to easily make an alternative suggestion of something they may need help with.

- Offer to get lunch while you're out or make them a tea during work.
- Cook a meal or organise meals via apps such as Gather My Crew.
- Mind children or pets while the person is at treatment.
- Drive the person to treatment.
- Shop for groceries.
- Help with small household tasks, such as weeding the garden or helping with cleaning.
- Offer to organise a catch-up with workmates if the person is up to it.
- Donate blood.

#### Offers of financial support

A group of workmates might choose to donate money or fundraise for a co-worker under financial stress. Remember a co-worker may wish to keep their diagnosis private – and talking about money can be awkward – so check if this is appropriate with the person first.

Talk to your manager about any plans you or any workers may have for fundraising, especially at work. There may be guidelines around this kind of activity and what channels you can use (e.g. company social media). You could make some suggestions and ask your co-worker for any others that may help them.

- Taxi vouchers or a rideshare giftcard, so that the colleague can get to treatment easily.
- Meal delivery service vouchers.
- A cleaner or gardener to come in before they return home from hospital, or to help at home.
- Child-minding services.



## Look after yourself too

A person with cancer will probably have good and bad days, so it's important to consider the extra pressures a cancer diagnosis can bring. But it can also be difficult to watch someone you work with go through a serious illness. It's understandable that you may feel a range of emotions.

You may find it helpful to:

- talk to your manager or mentor about how you are feeling
- speak to your co-workers and check in with them
- ask your general practitioner (GP) for a referral to a psychologist or counsellor
- access the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) (if offered by your employer).

You can call Cancer Council 13 11 20 to talk about how you're feeling or to ask any questions. You can also visit our website (see details right), join our online community to connect with others, or listen to our podcasts.

## Don't forget the carers

Co-workers who are caring for a family member or friend with cancer may also appreciate your support. They may find the suggestions in this fact sheet useful and you can also reach out to them with offers of help, just like you would with a co-worker with cancer.

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

### Acknowledgements

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[See our full list of expert and consumer reviewers.](#)

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Cancer Council acknowledges Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to Elders past, present and emerging.



## Where to get help and information

Call Cancer Council 13 11 20 for more information about cancer in the workplace. You can ask for free copies of our booklets about cancer types and treatments, and working when you have cancer, or download digital copies from your local Cancer Council website.

ACT	<a href="http://actcancer.org">actcancer.org</a>
NSW	<a href="http://cancercouncil.com.au">cancercouncil.com.au</a>
NT	<a href="http://cancer.org.au/nt">cancer.org.au/nt</a>
QLD	<a href="http://cancerqld.org.au">cancerqld.org.au</a>
SA	<a href="http://cancersa.org.au">cancersa.org.au</a>
TAS	<a href="http://cancer.org.au/tas">cancer.org.au/tas</a>
VIC	<a href="http://cancervic.org.au">cancervic.org.au</a>
WA	<a href="http://cancerwa.asn.au">cancerwa.asn.au</a>
Australia	<a href="http://cancer.org.au">cancer.org.au</a>

## Other useful websites

You can find many useful resources online, but not all websites are reliable. These websites are good sources of support and information.

Australian Human Rights Commission	1300 656 419 <a href="http://humanrights.gov.au">humanrights.gov.au</a>
Fair Work Commission	1300 799 675 <a href="http://fwc.gov.au">fwc.gov.au</a>
Fair Work Ombudsman	13 13 94 <a href="http://fairwork.gov.au">fairwork.gov.au</a>

**Workplace fact sheets** – Other workplace fact sheets, such as *Cancer: an overview*, *Talking to an employee about cancer* and *Creating cancer-friendly workplaces*, are available on your local Cancer Council website.

### Note to reader

This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and should not be seen as a substitute for medical, legal or financial advice. You should obtain independent advice relevant to your specific situation from appropriate professionals. Information on cancer, including the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of cancer, is constantly being updated and revised by medical professionals and the research community. 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.