

# Talking to an employee about cancer

*A guide for managers and human resources professionals*

**Talking with an employee about cancer can feel daunting. You may be concerned about their wellbeing, and balancing their needs or rights with those of the workplace. This fact sheet has suggestions for how to approach a conversation about cancer with an employee. Also see *Creating cancer-friendly workplaces* for specific ways that your workplace can support an employee through cancer treatment or a return to work.**

## Where and when to talk

You need to have clear consent from the employee before talking to them about their health or wellbeing.

Your first meeting may be face-to-face (usually at work), or it may need to be on the phone or online. As with any confidential conversation, choose somewhere private – where you won't be interrupted or distracted by people, computers or phones.

Try to organise the meeting in advance so that you both have time to prepare – avoid a quick chat in the corridor or kitchen. Set aside enough time to give the conversation your undivided attention. You don't want to have to abruptly stop the conversation because you have another meeting.

Let the employee know they're not in trouble and this is just to talk about ways you can support them – and that they can bring someone along for support too (e.g. a friend, family member or close co-worker).

Keep in mind that the employee may feel distressed talking about cancer. They may be okay at first, but later become upset. Offer support, but if they don't seem to want to continue, suggest rescheduling.

## Ways to prepare

If you can, do some preparation before you have a conversation. This way you can give the employee as much information as possible. You're also more likely to feel organised and comfortable if you have some idea of what to say, and things to ask.

## Where to start

- Read any policy or best practice guidelines for managing an employee with a chronic illness.
- Ask human resources (HR) for guidance on how similar situations were handled, without revealing any personal details or specifics.
- Find out what your duty of care obligations are.
- Check any legal obligations (see also last page).
- Find out any special leave the employee may be entitled to, as well as any regular leave they may already be owed (e.g. personal or annual leave).
- Read about the cancer treatment and side effects from a reliable source such as Cancer Council.
- Review any return to work policies (including what medical assessments they may need to have).
- Check any flexible working policies, and think about options you may be able to suggest.
- Have any Employee Assistance Program (EAP) details ready to share.



### Communicating well

People communicate in different ways, so think about the employee, their situation and what they may need. Some people will be open and want to talk about everything, while others will be more private. During any communications, be sensitive and show empathy. Keep in mind that legally, the employee doesn't have to tell you any more than what may affect their ability to do their job.

You may just want to know if the employee is okay, and how you can help. But an employee may be reluctant to discuss details of the cancer for several reasons. They might:

- be worried that they could lose their job or have their hours cut
- want to keep personal information private
- still be finding out details about their diagnosis or making decisions about treatment
- have particular cultural beliefs about cancer
- be uncomfortable because of the type of cancer (e.g. breast or a genital cancer) or due to a gender concern (e.g. a male employee may not want to discuss testicular cancer with a female manager).

**Listening** – Where possible, let the employee guide the conversation. Take into account any cultural considerations and be sure to respect them. Focus more on listening than talking, and try not to interrupt. This will help you to find out more about your employee's situation and needs. Answer questions as well as you can, and commit to follow up on anything you can't answer at the time.

**Asking questions** – You will probably want to offer support and have things to ask (see page 3), but first focus on the employee's concerns. Also, being confronted with a lot of questions, no matter how well intentioned, can feel like pressure (especially if the employee doesn't know the answers yet themselves). If they seem uncomfortable, suggest you return to those topics if, or when, they feel ready to discuss. Or offer that they could reply by email.

**Key messaging** – There are specific things you can discuss at this or other meetings (see page 3), but in general, for the first conversation you could:

- ask what the employee needs from you and their workplace right now

- tell them that the conversation is confidential, although you may need to discuss any leave requirements with HR
- reassure the employee that they cannot lose their job because of the cancer diagnosis itself
- explain that together you can make reasonable adjustments to the workplace so that they can still carry out the essential parts of their job.

### Talking about cancer

#### What to say



##### Show empathy by saying things like:

*"I understand that you're going through a really tough time."*

*"I can imagine you have a lot on your mind right now."*

*"We are here for you and will help you along the way."*

*"If you feel like talking, I'm here or you can talk to ..."*

*"Many people in your situation would have that reaction."*

*"Do you mind talking about the cancer and how you feel?"*

*"It's understandable that you might feel sad or distressed."*

#### What not to say



Don't share stories about other people with cancer or offer your own advice.

*"I'm sure you'll be fine" or "It will all work out".*

Don't say that everything will be okay, because you don't know that it will.

Avoid saying things like *"don't worry"*, as this can sound dismissive of the person's feelings.

Don't tell someone to *"be positive"*. While you may think this is being supportive or encouraging, it can put pressure on the person to always show a happy face, no matter what they are going through.

*"You're strong, you can beat this."*

This can sound like the cancer is something that the person can control, or if they have the right mindset it will be cured. This can be frustrating, as having cancer often feels like so much is already out of the person's control.

Don't say *"I know just how you feel"* or *"I know just what you should do"*.

*"How long do you have?" or "Can they cure you?"*

Don't ask about someone's prognosis unless they bring it up and want to talk with you about it.

### Details to discuss

While the employee may not know a lot about their situation at first, and how it may impact their role, there are some things that it's helpful to discuss (while being mindful of their right to privacy). Cancer may cause unexpected changes to treatment plans, side effects and outcomes – so avoid pressure for the employee to commit to something now, or tell them you realise these plans may change.

#### Sharing the news with co-workers



Ask whether the employee wants to keep the diagnosis private, or tell their co-workers. Some may want to wait at first, then share the news later. If they do want to tell people, ask them:

- who they want to know (e.g. just their team or the whole company)
- if they want to tell people themselves or prefer you to do it
- specifics of what they want to share
- how they want the news to be shared (e.g. an email or in-person chat)
- if they would like help telling their manager (if that's not you).

#### Managing leave for treatment and recovery



Ask if the employee has an idea of what time they may need to take for treatment and recovery, and whether they want to continue working or prefer to take time away from work. Let them know that you realise this is a tough time, and that taking time off is understandable and won't reflect on their commitment to the workplace.

Check whether the employee knows their leave entitlements and any accrued leave. Tell them of any other leave options available to them (e.g. insurance policies, unpaid leave).

#### Developing a work plan



Work with the employee to clarify their role, responsibilities and any reasonable adjustments (see below) that can be made to support them. Explain that legally you need to know of anything that could reasonably cause a health and safety risk for themselves or other employees.

Discuss any concerns, such as what assistance can be offered, fear of discrimination or that co-workers may react negatively if they know about the cancer. Together, outline a plan for how to support them to work.

#### Available support



Let the employee know of support you or their team can offer, as well as details of any Employee Assistance Program for them and their family.

#### Adjustments to duties, workspace or hours



Discuss how you can help the employee work as much as they're able or want to. Explain that you can consider reasonable flexibility requests (for eligible employees), and offer ideas (e.g. reduced hours, flexible roster, working from home, fewer meetings, less complex tasks). You may be able to offer extra breaks or workspace changes such as somewhere to sit. Ask what the employee thinks may be of help to them.

### Going forward



You don't have to agree on everything in the first meeting – keep in mind that after a diagnosis things may feel confusing or overwhelming. You may both need to get more details, think through proposals or wait for more medical information. The person may also be okay to work now, but may need time off or flexible working arrangements during treatment. So, let them know that you understand that the things you decide on now may need to change in the future. After the meeting, if you haven't taken notes, summarise the key points and concerns and send to the employee. This will help you both have a clear understanding of the situation going forward.



If there is a chance that the cancer has occurred due to workplace exposure, refer to the workplace's policies and procedures for supporting the employee and the organisation in an occupational cancer or workers compensation situation.

### What to follow up on

- Consider the employee's right to privacy. Don't tell anyone (in person or via email/message) unless the employee has given you permission to (or if there is a serious risk of harm to others).
- If you have the employee's permission, give HR (or the person in your workplace who deals with personnel matters) an overview of the situation and any documentation given to you.
- Ask HR or payroll about any other special leave provisions, leave without pay options, or other assistance available (if you haven't already).
- Resolve any questions your employee had about their work arrangements and give them the information as soon as possible.
- Follow through with any suggestions or commitments you made (e.g. you may have agreed to inform co-workers).
- Requests for flexible working arrangements need to be responded to in writing within 21 days, so action or follow this up as a priority.
- Keep a record of the conversation and email the employee with details of any agreed changes or adjustments 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.
- Review the workload of other co-workers to make sure they aren't unfairly burdened by the changes.

### 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 on cancer treatments and side effects, and related topics such as cancer's impact on finances and work, including the *Cancer, Work and You* booklet. Or you can download digital copies of these 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*, *Supporting a co-worker with cancer* and *Creating cancer-friendly workplaces*, are available on your local Cancer Council website.

### Acknowledgements

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

### 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.

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