

Cancer myths and facts

A guide for managers and human resource professionals

There are many myths about cancer, which can make it difficult for managers and co-workers to talk openly about an employee's cancer. This fact sheet provides information on some of the common misconceptions about cancer and its treatment that might be relevant in the workplace.

Myth	Fact
There is no effective treatment for cancer	Cancer treatment greatly reduces the risk of cancer spreading, prolongs survival, and in many cases causes all signs and symptoms of the cancer to disappear.
A cancer diagnosis will always lead to death	Factors such as the type of cancer, how early it was diagnosed, and access to treatment, as well as a person's age, fitness and medical history all affect how a person responds to treatment. About 70% of people diagnosed with cancer in Australia will still be alive five years after treatment, and several common cancers, including breast, prostate and melanoma, have survival rates of 85% or greater. ¹
Surgery causes cancer to spread throughout the body	Specialist surgeons know how to take biopsy samples safely and to remove tumours without causing cancer to spread. The surgeon may remove some healthy tissue around the cancer to ensure that all of the detectable cancer is removed. For a few types of cancer, surgeons take extra precautions to prevent any chance of it spreading.
Radiation therapy makes you radioactive	External beam radiation therapy does not make people radioactive. This is because the radiation does not stay in the body during or after treatment. It is safe for people to be with co-workers, clients, children and pregnant women. Implants used in internal radiation therapy (brachytherapy) may cause some people to be radioactive for a short time, depending on whether their implants are temporary or permanent. People should be guided by their doctors about any precautions to take in the workplace.
Cancer is contagious	Some people worry that if they have physical contact with someone who has cancer, they could catch it too. This is not true.
People with cancer are too ill to work	Although some people are unable to work due to side effects from cancer treatment, improvements to treatments mean that people are often able to continue working during treatment with the assistance of their employer.
Injuries can cause cancer	Bumps, bruises or other injuries do not cause cancer. Sometimes doctors may discover a tumour when they are treating a person for an injury, but it was not the injury that caused the cancer. Chronic inflammatory processes may at times increase the risk of certain cancers, but these instances only account for a small fraction of cases.

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Nothing can be done to prevent cancer	About one in three cases of cancer in Australia could be prevented if people changed their lifestyles. Some simple steps can help people reduce their risk of cancer, e.g. stopping smoking, protecting skin from the sun, drinking less alcohol, exercising more, being a healthy weight, eating more fruit and vegetables and cutting down on red and processed meat.
Thinking positively can cure cancer	There is little evidence to link a positive attitude with curing cancer. Cancer is not caused by negative thoughts, and treatment can be stressful and tiring. There is no right way to feel – experiencing a range of emotions is normal and everyone will cope differently.

Visit Cancer Council's iheard.com.au for more information on common misconceptions about cancer.

Cultural considerations

A person's beliefs can influence their attitude towards cancer. Many cultures do not talk openly about cancer. This may affect how the employee or the employer responds to the diagnosis or shares information about cancer. Other points to keep in mind include:

- People may think that cancer is contagious, caused by bad luck or always fatal.
- Some people may believe that cancer has been sent to test them or is a punishment.
- People with cancer may feel ashamed or fear being stigmatised.
- In some cases, carers and family members may not tell the cancer patient about the diagnosis, believing that this information will hasten their decline.
- While it's important to understand the impact of cultural or spiritual beliefs about cancer, don't assume that all people within a particular religion or culture practise the same rituals or have the same beliefs.

Where to get help and information

- **Workplace fact sheets** – Other online fact sheets such as *Cancer: an overview* and *Managing the effects of treatment* are available on your local Cancer Council website.
- **Cancer Council 13 11 20** – Call for more information about cancer in the workplace. You can ask for free copies of our booklets on cancer treatments and side effects, or download digital copies from your local Cancer Council website.

References

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Cancer in Australia 2019*, AIHW, Canberra, 2019. [Statistics do not include non-melanoma skin cancers.]

Acknowledgements

This information was developed with help from a range of human resource, legal and health professionals, and people affected by cancer. We thank the reviewers of this fact sheet: Dr Fiona Day, Medical Oncologist, Calvary Mater Newcastle, NSW; John Boomsma, Consumer; Lydia Chin, HR Business Partner, Australian Red Cross, VIC; Emily Gibson, Social Worker, Mater Hospital Brisbane, QLD; Shai Ishaq, Head, Talent and Culture, Pureprofile, NSW; Nick Ruskin, Partner, K&L Gates, NSW; Andrew Smith, Occupational Therapist, Co-Founder and Director, Allied Education Group, VIC; Amy Wallis, Occupational Therapist, Co-Founder and Director, Allied Education Group, VIC; Kerrynann White, Manager, People and Culture, Cancer Council SA.

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.



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