

Creating cancer-friendly workplaces

A guide for managers and human resource professionals

Workplaces are an important source of support for many people affected by cancer. There are good business reasons for supporting employees with cancer and their carers to continue working during and after treatment.

It is important to develop policies that support an employee with cancer or carer's responsibilities to continue working. These policies provide a framework for a supportive work environment.

Every workplace is different and you'll need to adapt these ideas to suit your circumstances. This fact sheet is a starting point, and we encourage you to consult with your staff and be creative.

How cancer affects the workplace

Cancer affects many people who work. In Australia, it is estimated that about 40% of people diagnosed with cancer each year are of working age.¹ Working age generally means people aged from 20 to 64. Employees who are caring for someone diagnosed with cancer may also need support.

Work is important for many people diagnosed with cancer or caring for someone with cancer. Aside from providing income, it helps give a sense of normal life and offers social contact.

Creating a supportive and caring workplace during an illness can:

- retain skills, expertise and corporate knowledge
- avoid the time and cost of recruitment
- help build team morale
- encourage greater loyalty
- foster a positive image of the organisation.

Managers and employers can help create a workplace that assists employees having cancer treatment, removes barriers that prevent employees

returning to work after treatment, and supports working carers.

Developing clear policies

Employers have a general duty of care to ensure the health and safety of all employees. Under the Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, cancer is considered to be a disability.

Your workplace may already have policies or guidelines to create a cancer-friendly workplace. If not, you may want to develop such tools. The box on the next page includes points to consider when developing a policy for employees affected by cancer. This is a general guide only and you'll need to consider the needs of your workplace and job type. You may also find it helpful to refer to information from peak industry bodies, consultants, unions, employees, line managers and other relevant people, organisations and guidelines.

Australian law requires employers to make changes to accommodate the effects of cancer to help employees continue working. These changes are known as reasonable adjustments.

You must ensure that your recruitment policies and procedures do not discriminate against people who are seeking work after a cancer diagnosis. 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 where it can be found.

Everyone's experience of cancer is different. To support an employee, think about how to tailor support to their unique situation.



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What to include in a cancer-friendly workplace policy

- Outline of the workplace's legal obligations – e.g. Commonwealth *Fair Work Act 2009* and *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, as well as any relevant state or territory workplace health and safety or discrimination laws
- Guiding principles – e.g. “to create a flexible and supportive workplace that encourages employees to discuss their personal needs”
- Details of leave entitlements – paid or unpaid, including any additional leave available beyond the minimum statutory entitlements, or other benefits such as salary continuance insurance or income protection within a superannuation policy
- Information on flexible working arrangements – what they are and how to access them
- Zero tolerance for discrimination or harassment of any employee with cancer or who is a carer
- 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
- Where to access information on cancer
- Information about cancer-related issues, including the value of work to many people with cancer and their carers
- Outline of 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
- Ways to balance support for the affected employee and their rights, with potential impacts on co-workers
- Privacy obligations, including guidelines for communicating the news to co-workers
- 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 during treatment

Working during treatment is possible, but an employee may need time off to attend doctors' appointments, have treatment and deal with side effects. As an employer, you are legally obliged to make reasonable adjustments. Some employees may need support for a short time, others may need ongoing assistance even after treatment is over.

Review flexible working arrangements

There are many types of flexible working arrangements. What is possible will vary between workplaces and jobs. Some examples include:

- working from home some or all days
- adjusting workload
- working from another office or worksite
- changing start, finish or break times
- varying hours, working part-time or job-sharing
- distributing working hours across the week.

Enabling an employee to change their work hours to attend medical appointments and treatment can reduce the amount of leave they need to take. For example, if an employee can come to work early and leave early, they may be able to schedule treatment after work.

Some employees may find it easier to work from home – for example, so they can rest during breaks or 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 temporarily moving their workstations 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.

Adjust workload temporarily

To make it easier for an employee to work during treatment, you could adjust project time frames, change 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.

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Offer additional leave

Some workplaces are able to offer additional paid or unpaid personal/carer's leave to employees undergoing cancer treatment. Check whether the organisation's superannuation policy offers automatic income protection insurance.

Access to parking

Many people having cancer treatment experience fatigue as a side effect and commuting to work may contribute to overall exhaustion. Being able to park close to your workplace may make it easier for the person to continue working. It may also be convenient if the employee needs to attend medical appointments during the day.

Provide a quiet place to rest

Having a short nap or a rest in a quiet place during the day may help an employee manage fatigue. This can be as simple as a comfortable chair in a quiet room or screened-off section of a staff common area. It is best not to use an existing sick bay for these rests, because treatment may make the person with cancer more prone to infectious illnesses.

Access to counselling

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

Encourage other employees to stay home when sick

An employee having cancer treatment often has lower immunity, so they are especially vulnerable to other illnesses. Exposure to a cold or tummy bug may make them very ill.

Improve understanding of cancer among co-workers

Providing access to accurate information about cancer can help dispel fear and myths.

Ensure employees know about support

List Cancer Council 13 11 20 on your organisation's intranet or staff noticeboard and provide 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 co-worker 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. Ask if they would like any contact with their co-workers.

Supporting an employee returning to work after treatment

Developing policies and procedures to support people returning to work will help you retain staff and corporate knowledge. Options to consider include:

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.

Facilitate a gradual return to work

For some employees who have been on extended sick leave, a gradual return to work can help them readjust, manage their fatigue and regain confidence. They could start off with reduced hours and build up to their normal hours.

Assess the workspace

Cancer may cause physical changes. 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 reaching. These changes may be permanent or temporary. When an employee returns to work, conduct an ergonomic assessment of the work environment to check it is suitable and safe for their current physical condition. Agree on a regular review period to monitor changes (such as improved flexibility or strength).

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Arrange a buddy system

A buddy or mentoring system with another employee in your workplace affected by cancer can help provide support on 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.

Offer accessible bathroom facilities

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

Provide disposal system for sanitary and hazardous waste

After treatment for particular types of cancer, such as prostate cancer, some people may experience a loss of continence and may need to wear incontinence pads. Providing a suitable disposal system in all bathrooms can help avoid embarrassment.

If an employee is having chemotherapy at work – for example, through a chemotherapy pump – their medical team can advise how hazardous materials can be returned to the hospital for disposal.

Where to get help and information

- **Workplace fact sheets** – Other online fact sheets such as *Talking to your employee about cancer*, *Managing the effects of treatment* and *Supporting working carers* 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.
- **Australian Human Rights Commission** – humanrights.gov.au; 1300 656 419
- **Fair Work Ombudsman** – fairwork.gov.au; 13 13 94

Cancer Council websites

ACT..... actcancer.org
 NSW cancercouncil.com.au
 NT..... nt.cancer.org.au
 QLD cancerqld.org.au
 SA..... cancersa.org.au
 TAS cancertas.org.au
 VIC cancervic.org.au
 WA..... cancerwa.asn.au
 Australia..... cancer.org.au

References

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

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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.