

Talking to your employee about cancer

A guide for managers and human resource professionals

As a manager, your first conversation with an employee about their cancer can feel daunting. You will probably be concerned for their wellbeing and conscious of the need to balance the employee's needs and rights with the needs of the workplace. This fact sheet provides some suggestions about how to approach this conversation, what to expect and how to talk about cancer.

Choosing a time and place

As with any serious conversation, choose a private place where you won't be distracted or interrupted by other people, computers or phones. Set aside plenty of time so you can give the conversation your full attention. If possible, organise the meeting in advance to give the employee time to prepare, and also to bring someone to support them if they wish.

Keep in mind that your employee may find it upsetting to talk about the diagnosis. If the employee doesn't seem up to talking, suggest making another time for the conversation.

Preparing for the conversation

If you have notice of the conversation with the employee, spend some time preparing for it. Learning more about the diagnosis, treatment and side effects will help make the discussion as constructive as possible.

Familiarise yourself with your workplace's relevant policies and legal obligations before the meeting. This may include your duty of care obligations, leave provisions, return to work policies, flexible working policies, and details of any Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Some workplaces may have a specific policy or best practice guidelines about managing employees with a chronic illness. You

can also ask the human resources team for some guidance and how other similar situations (without revealing specific details) have been handled.

You don't have to discuss all these issues in the initial meeting. It is important in the first instance to listen to the employee's concerns and take note of any requests they have. Depending on how much you cover in the conversation, you may want to arrange a follow-up meeting with the employee.

Communicating well

People communicate in different ways, so you will need to tailor your approach to the individual employee and situation. Some people will be open about their situation, while others will be more private.

Keep in mind that an employee may be reluctant to discuss details of the cancer for several reasons. For example, the person might:

- be worried about possible consequences of being open about the diagnosis – that is, losing their job or having their hours cut
- want to keep personal information private
- still be making decisions about treatment
- have particular cultural beliefs about cancer
- be uncomfortable about the type of cancer they have (e.g. anal cancer) or a gender difference – for instance, a male employee may not wish to discuss testicular cancer with a female manager.

Let your employee guide the conversation. Ask what they need from you and the workplace right now. Reassure them that the conversation can be kept confidential, although you will need to discuss any leave requirements with human resources. Reassure the employee that they cannot be dismissed because of the cancer diagnosis itself and that you will work with them to make any reasonable adjustments to the workplace so that they can still carry out the essential parts of their job.

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Issues to discuss


You may want to address these concerns:

- **sharing news with colleagues** – ask whether the employee wants their co-workers to know about the diagnosis and, if so, how and when they would like to pass on the news
- **barriers to working** – discuss issues that may make it hard to work, such as uncertainty about the type of assistance that can be provided, fear of discrimination, fear co-workers may find out about the cancer and have negative reactions
- **develop a work plan** – work with the employee to clarify their role, responsibilities and any reasonable adjustments that can be made to support them
- **leave entitlements** – check whether the employee is aware of their leave entitlements and accrued leave balance
- **taking time off** – ask what time off the employee is likely to need for treatment and recovery, and whether they wish to continue working during treatment
- **adjustments to duties, workspace or hours** – discuss what reasonable adjustments can be made to allow the employee to work as much as they're able to
- **available support** – advise if there is an employee assistance program and its availability to the employee and their family.

If you work in human resources, you may also want to discuss whether the employee would like your help letting their manager know about the diagnosis.

Don't feel that you have to agree on everything in the first meeting – keep in mind that after a diagnosis everything is confusing and overwhelming. You may both need to get more information and think through decisions.

At the end of the meeting, summarise any key points or concerns the employee has raised, so that you both have a clear understanding of the situation.

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

Talking with your employee

How to talk

- In the initial conversation, focus on the employee – you will probably do more listening than talking. This will help you learn more about your employee's situation and needs. People affected by cancer often say that the best thing other people can do is listen.
- Pay close attention to what the employee is saying and try not to interrupt.
- Be sensitive to your employee's feelings and follow their lead.
- Show empathy by using a phrase such as “I can imagine you have a lot on your mind right now”.
- Recognise your employee's right to privacy.
- Know your workplace's policies and leave entitlements.
- Consider what reasonable adjustments you can make to the employee's working arrangements.
- Be prepared to be flexible. Your employee may not know how treatment will affect them and side effects may change over time.
- Be mindful of any cultural considerations that may affect your discussion.
- Answer any questions as clearly and thoroughly as possible. If you don't know the answer, tell your employee that you don't know but will find out and get back to them. Be sure to follow up as soon as you can.
- Listen as much as you talk. Employees are more likely to be engaged when they feel they are being heard.

What to avoid

- Avoid the temptation to have a quick chat in the corridor or kitchen.
- Avoid sharing stories about other people with cancer you may have known.
- Don't say that everything will be okay, because you don't know that it will.
- Avoid telling the employee to “be positive”. While well intentioned, this can place additional pressure on the person to always show a happy face, no matter what they are going through.

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After the conversation

- Be mindful of the employee's right to privacy and do not disclose their diagnosis to anyone unless permission has been given.
- If you have the employee's permission, provide human resources (or the person in your workplace who deals with personnel matters) with an overview of the situation and with any documentation provided by the employee.
- If you have not already done so, ask human resources whether there are any other special leave provisions or other assistance available.
- Resolve any questions your employee had about their work arrangements that you were unable to answer, and get back to your employee with the information as soon as possible.
- Follow through with any suggestions or commitments you make – for example, you may have agreed to inform co-workers or to look into flexible working arrangements.
- Make a file note of the conversation and send an email to your employee setting out any agreed changes 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 workloads of other team members to ensure they are not unfairly burdened by the changes.

Where to get help and information

- **Workplace fact sheets** – Other online fact sheets such as *Cancer: an overview*, *Cancer myths and facts* and *Creating cancer-friendly workplaces* 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

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: Lydia Chin, HR Business Partner, Australian Red Cross, VIC; John Boomsma, Consumer; 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; Kerryann 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.