

Creating cancer-friendly workplaces

A guide for managers and human resources professionals

Workplaces are a valuable source of support for many people affected by cancer. This fact sheet looks at how workplaces can support employees with cancer – and carers – during and after treatment.

Policies that help an employee keep working after a cancer diagnosis are important. These policies provide a supportive work environment for employees affected by cancer, including carers.

How cancer affects the workplace

Cancer affects many people who work. In Australia, almost 40% of people diagnosed with cancer each year are of working age (aged 20 to 64).¹ There are also people in the workplace who are carers for someone with cancer. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that almost 75% of the 3 million carers in Australia are in paid employment.

Work can be 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 supports employees while they are having cancer treatment, removes barriers that prevent employees returning to work after treatment, and helps working carers.

Have clear policies

Employers have a general duty of care to ensure the health and safety of all employees. Discriminating against someone at work because they have a disability is against the law under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and *Fair Work Act 2009*, as well as state and territory legislation. Cancer is considered a disability under these laws.

Legislation requires employers to make any reasonable adjustments requested by eligible employees affected by cancer which can help them to continue working. Failure to implement reasonable adjustments may amount to discrimination.

Your workplace may already have policies or guidelines – if not, see page 4. 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.

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.



Support during treatment

People are often able to work during treatment but they may need time off to attend medical appointments and deal with side effects. As an employer, you are legally obliged to make reasonable adjustments requested by an eligible employee. Some employees may need support for a short time, others may need ongoing assistance.

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
- 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 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 benefit from being able to also work from home at times 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 workstation helpful – for example, to a quieter location if an employee is struggling to concentrate, or to a ground floor location if someone finds climbing the stairs a challenge.

Ways to support your employee during treatment

Adjust workload temporarily



To make it easier for an employee to work during treatment, you could adjust project time frames, change the tasks (e.g. reduce 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.

Offer additional leave



Some workplaces can offer additional personal or carer's leave during cancer treatment. Check if your organisation's superannuation policy offers income protection insurance.

Access to parking



Fatigue is a common side effect of cancer treatment, and commuting to work may contribute to exhaustion. Having parking close to work may make it easier for the person to keep working. It may also help if they need to attend medical appointments during the day.

Provide a quiet place to rest



Having a rest in a quiet place during the day may help an employee manage fatigue. This could be 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 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 during treatment and recovery. Many Employee Assistance Programs offer a confidential counselling service, or you could arrange for a counsellor specialising in cancer-related issues to attend your workplace.

Stay home when sick



An employee having cancer treatment often has lower immunity. Exposure to a cold or stomach bug may make them very ill. Encourage co-workers to wear a mask or stay home if unwell.

Provide access to cancer resources

Improving co-workers' understanding of cancer can help dispel fear and myths. Ensure employees have access to accurate information. 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 on extended sick leave for treatment or illness can sometimes feel isolated or anxious about their job. 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.

How to support 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 resources professional within your organisation or an external workplace rehabilitation consultant can work 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. Cancer and its

treatment impacts everyone differently. Having regular reviews of an employee's work hours and capacity can help provide a tailored return to work.

Assess the workspace

Cancer may cause physical changes. Some changes are visible but others like loss of strength, diminished vision, or difficulty sitting or standing are less so. 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 the employee's current physical condition.

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. But ask the employee if this is what they would like – it should be optional for both parties and also include clear guidelines about the system, how it will operate, and where the buddy can find support with their role.

Offer accessible bathroom facilities

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

Provide a 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 (e.g. through a chemotherapy pump) their medical team can advise how hazardous materials can be returned to the hospital for disposal.

“Having a written plan was a safety net for me. When I felt I should be working more or was anxious about people's expectations, I knew I could stick to the approved plan and return at my own pace.” KRISTIN

What to include in a cancer-friendly workplace policy

- **An outline of the workplace’s legal obligations** – e.g. *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. it might be “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
- **Guidelines for communicating with employees affected by cancer** – during treatment and/or while they are absent from the workplace
- **Where to access accurate information on cancer**
- **Information about cancer-related issues** – e.g. the value of work to people with cancer and carers
- **Outline of the roles of staff** – e.g. human resources, external professionals such as psychologists or counsellors, Employee Assistance Program personnel
- **Support for all involved** – balancing the rights of the affected employee with the impacts on co-workers
- **Privacy obligations** – including guidelines for communicating the news to co-workers and an employee’s right to privacy
- **Education and training** – for managers
- **Promotion of healthy lifestyle choices** – to support prevention of cancer and other chronic diseases

Once you have a policy in place, let employees know it exists and where it can be found.

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 after a cancer diagnosis or you can download digital copies from your local Cancer Council website.

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

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 humanrights.gov.au
Fair Work Ombudsman	13 13 94 fairwork.gov.au

Workplace fact sheets – Other fact sheets such as *Cancer: an overview*, *Talking to your employee* and *Supporting working carers* are available on your local Cancer Council website.

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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

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References

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Cancer Data in Australia 2024*, AIHW, Canberra, viewed 21 August 2024, available from aihw.gov.au/reports/cancer/cancer-data-in-australia.

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