

# Creating cancer-friendly workplaces

There are sound business reasons for supporting employees with cancer or caring for someone with cancer to continue working or to return to work following treatment. Providing a supportive environment during an illness can encourage greater organisational loyalty and foster a positive image of the organisation. Recruitment can also be a time-consuming and expensive process and there are clear benefits in retaining skills, expertise and corporate knowledge.

Employers have a general duty of care to all employees to ensure their health and safety. Developing policies for a cancer diagnosis provides managers and employees with a framework for creating a supportive work environment for people affected by cancer. Every workplace is different, and some initiatives will be easier to implement in some workplaces than in others. The ideas in this fact sheet are intended to provide a starting point, and we encourage you to consult with your staff and be creative.

## Developing and communicating clear policies

Your workplace may already have policies, operating procedures or guidelines in place that address the issues arising from managing employees affected by a serious illness such as cancer. If not, you may want to develop such tools.

The following are some areas for consideration when developing a policy that covers employees affected by cancer. These are a general guide only and when developing your organisation's policy you may also find it helpful to refer to peak industry bodies, consultants, unions, employees, line managers and other relevant people or organisations.

Once you have a policy, let employees know that it exists and make it accessible.

Remember, too, that everyone's experience of cancer will be different and the support that is tailored to the individual employee's unique situation will be the most effective.

### Your policy should consider:

- leave entitlements – paid and unpaid, and whether the organisation will go beyond statutory entitlements
- statutory rights and obligations
- provision of flexible working arrangements
- zero tolerance for discrimination or harassment of any employee with cancer or who is a carer
- workplace support strategies, such as those described in this fact sheet
- guidelines for communication with employees during treatment and/or while they are absent from the workplace
- facilitating understanding of cancer-related issues, including an appreciation of the importance of work to many people with cancer and carers
- where to access information on cancer
- involvement of return-to-work coordinators, human resources staff, employee health staff, and/or external professionals such as counsellors or psychologists
- balancing support for the affected employee and his or her rights with potential impacts on colleagues
- respect for privacy
- awareness and management of impacts on colleagues and team members
- 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 having cancer treatment

Employees who continue working during their treatment can face some particular challenges. Many need to take some time off work to have treatment or deal with side effects, such as fatigue or nausea.

There are many practical things that employers can do to make it a little easier for an employee to continue to work while receiving treatment. Here are just a few:

### Flexible working arrangements

Enabling employees to change their working hours to accommodate medical appointments and treatment can be extremely helpful. This can also reduce the amount of leave they would otherwise need to take. For example, if an employee can come to work early and leave early, he or she may be able to schedule treatment after work. Of course, what is possible in terms of flexibility will vary between workplaces and jobs.

Some employees may find it easier to work from home to facilitate rest breaks, for example, or avoid a tiring commute. If an employee is working from home, remember to keep in regular contact and be mindful of occupational health and safety considerations.

Other employees may find that temporarily moving their workstations can be 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.

### Temporary adjustments to workload

Adjusting project deadlines, changing the nature of tasks (for example, reducing or eliminating physically demanding tasks) for a while or temporarily reallocating some work to other employees can make it easier for an employee to work during treatment. Talk to your employee about what would help and work out a plan together.

### Additional leave

Some organisations are able to offer additional paid or unpaid sick leave to employees undergoing cancer treatment, which can help relieve some of the financial burdens associated with cancer.

### Access to parking

Many people having cancer treatment experience fatigue, and commuting can be one more factor that contributes to overall exhaustion. Short-term access to parking close to your workplace may make it easier for the person to attend work. It may also be convenient if the employee has to come and go during the day to attend medical appointments.

### A quiet place for a nap

An employee's fatigue may be alleviated by a short nap or rest in a quiet place. For an employer, this can be as simple as providing a comfortable chair in a quiet room, such as an unused office or screened section of a staff common area. It is best not to locate this in an existing sick bay, because cancer treatment may make people more susceptible to other illnesses.

### Access to counselling

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

### Encourage other employees to stay home when ill

People undergoing cancer treatment often have lower immunity, so they are especially vulnerable to other illnesses. Exposure to a cold or tummy bug may make them very ill.

### Help employees find information and support

Cancer Council and other cancer organisations provide a range of information and support services. You can help employees access these by listing the Cancer Council Helpline number (13 11 20) on your organisation's intranet or staff notice board and providing 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 colleague can help the employee stay connected to the workplace. This can make them feel valued and included, and more likely to return to work.

## Ensure that employees know what is available

An employee with cancer will have many things on his or her mind, so make it as easy as possible to find out what support is available in your workplace. In addition to the support your organisation has in place, consider other assistance that may be available, such as superannuation policies with automatic income protection insurance.

## Promote understanding of cancer among colleagues

Providing access to accurate information about cancer can help dispel fear. Encourage colleagues to be supportive.

## Supporting an employee returning to work after treatment

### Return-to-work plan

A return-to-work coordinator within your organisation or a workplace rehabilitation consultant can liaise with the employee and his or her manager to develop a written return-to-work plan. This can be very helpful in clarifying the expectations of all parties and make the transition smoother.

### Ergonomic assessment of work space

Cancer may cause physical changes to a person's body. These changes may be permanent or last for a while after treatment ends. 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. When an employee returns to work, an ergonomic assessment of his or her work environment can help ensure that it is suitable and

safe for his or her current physical state. It is helpful to schedule periodic assessments to allow for future changes (such as improved flexibility or strength).

### Buddy system

A workplace buddy system involves teaming the employee affected by cancer with a colleague who has been through a similar experience and is willing to provide support and advice about returning to work. However, not everyone wants to share his or her experience and a buddy system should be optional for both parties.

### Facilitate a gradual return to work

For some employees who have been on extended sick leave, a gradual return to work (for example, starting off with reduced hours and building up to their normal hours) can help them readjust, manage their fatigue and regain confidence.

### Access to disabled bathroom facilities

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

### Sanitary and hazardous waste disposal

Some people who have undergone treatment for particular types of cancer, such as prostate cancer, may experience a loss of continence and may need to wear incontinence pads. Providing a suitable disposal system in both male and female bathrooms is a simple initiative that could save someone a great deal of embarrassment.

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

## Further information

- Cancer Council  
[www.cancer.org.au](http://www.cancer.org.au)
- Cancer Council Helpline  
13 11 20
- Workplace Fact Sheet –  
*Managing the effects of treatment*
- Workplace Fact Sheet –  
*Supporting working carers*
- Workplace Fact Sheet –  
*Supporting a colleague with cancer*
- Fair Work Ombudsman  
[www.fairwork.gov.au](http://www.fairwork.gov.au)  
13 13 94
- National anti-discrimination information gateway  
[www.antidiscrimination.gov.au](http://www.antidiscrimination.gov.au)