

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 colleagues 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 to the workplace.

MYTH	FACT
<p>✘ There is no effective treatment for cancer.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>✘ A cancer diagnosis is a death sentence.</p>	<p>Cancer survival is influenced by 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. Approximately 68% of people diagnosed with cancer in Australia will still be alive five years after treatment, and a number of common cancers, including breast, prostate and melanoma, have survival rates of 80% or greater.¹</p>
<p>✘ Treating a cancer with surgery causes it to spread throughout the body.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>✘ If a person is being treated with radiotherapy, they might be radioactive at work.</p>	<p>External radiotherapy does not make people radioactive because the radiation does not stay in the body during or after treatment. It is safe for patients to be with colleagues, clients, children and pregnant women. Implants used in internal radiotherapy (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 as to any precautions to take in the workplace.</p>
<p>✘ Cancer is contagious.</p>	<p>Some people worry that if they have physical contact with someone who has cancer, they could catch it too. This is not true.</p>
<p>✘ People with cancer are too ill to work.</p>	<p>Although some people are unable to work due to side effects from cancer treatment, improvements to treatment regimens mean that people are often able to continue working during treatment with the assistance of their employer.</p>
<p>✘ Injuries can cause cancer.</p>	<p>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.</p>

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MYTH	FACT
<p>✗ Nothing can be done to prevent cancer.</p>	<p>Around one in three cancer cases in Australia could be prevented if people modified their lifestyles. Some simple steps can help people reduce their risk of cancer, e.g. stopping smoking, being SunSmart, reducing alcohol consumption, exercising more, being a healthy weight, and eating more fruit and vegetables.</p>
<p>✗ Thinking positively can cure cancer.</p>	<p>There is little evidence to link a positive attitude with beating 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.</p>

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

Cultural considerations

Attitudes toward cancer are influenced by cultural beliefs and norms. Many cultures do not speak openly about cancer. This may affect how someone understands cancer and how information is shared.

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 have an understanding of the impact of cultural or spiritual beliefs about cancer, it should not be assumed that all people within a particular religion or culture practise the same rituals or have the same beliefs.

References

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Cancer in Australia 2017*, AIHW, Canberra, 2017. [Statistics do not include non-melanoma skin cancers.]

Where to get help and information

- **Workplace fact sheets – *Cancer: an overview.***
This and other fact sheets are available from your local Cancer Council website.
- **Call Cancer Council 13 11 20** – for more information about cancer in the workplace. You can also ask for free copies of our booklets, or download digital copies from your local Cancer Council website.

Cancer Council websites

- ACT..... actcancer.org
- NSW cancercouncil.com.au
- NT nt.cancer.org.au
- Queensland cancerqld.org.au
- SA..... cancersa.org.au
- Tasmania cancertas.org.au
- Victoria cancervic.org.au
- WA..... cancerwa.asn.au
- Australia cancer.org.au

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Note to reader

Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and is not a substitute for professional medical, legal or financial advice. Information about cancer is constantly being updated and revised by the medical and research communities. 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 in this fact sheet.



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