

# Managing the effects of treatment

A guide for managers and human resource professionals

**If an employee is having treatment for cancer, it is likely to impact on their work life in some way. They may, for example, need to take time off to have, or recover from, treatment. Side effects from cancer treatment are also common, and may make it difficult for an employee to work in their usual way.**

**This fact sheet provides an introduction to the most common types of cancer treatment and their side effects. It has information about the possible effects of treatment on an employee's ability to work, and some strategies for managing these effects in the workplace.**

## Overview of common treatments

The most commonly used treatments for cancer are surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Hormone therapy is also used for some hormone-dependent cancers. In recent years, clinical breakthroughs have led to new treatments, such as immunotherapy and targeted therapy, becoming more common for some types of cancers. Treatments may be used alone or in combination, according to the needs of the individual.

### Surgery

Surgery is performed to diagnose cancer, remove cancerous tissue from the body, or repair a part of the body affected by cancer. An operation can affect almost any part of the body, depending on where the cancer is located. Sometimes a surgeon may also remove some lymph nodes to determine whether the cancer has spread to other parts of the body.

The amount of time an employee will need off work to recover from their surgery will depend on how complex the surgery is. It could be as little as a day or as much as a few months. For some people, surgery will be the only treatment they need.

### Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy uses drugs known as cytotoxics to kill or slow the growth of cancer cells. The aim is to destroy cancer cells while causing the least possible damage to healthy cells. There are hundreds of different chemotherapy drugs. They are usually administered via a vein (intravenously), but are sometimes given orally as tablets, or as a cream or injection.

Most people have several treatment cycles over a number of weeks or months. Intravenous chemotherapy may be given on a daily, weekly or monthly basis at a treatment centre. Oral chemotherapy is generally taken daily at home.

### Radiotherapy

Radiotherapy, also called radiation therapy, uses radiation such as x-rays, gamma rays, electron beams or protons, to kill cancer cells or damage them so they cannot grow or multiply.

The most common kind is external beam radiotherapy, during which the patient lies on a treatment table underneath a machine that directs radiation beams at the cancerous tissue. Treatment is usually given daily on weekdays at a treatment centre for 4–8 weeks.

Brachytherapy (a type of internal radiotherapy) may be used to treat particular types of cancer. It delivers a high dose of radiation directly to the tumour. The radioactive material is sealed in an applicator and inserted into the patient's body near the cancer. The implant may stay in place for a few minutes during multiple sessions, for 1–6 days, or permanently.

### Hormone (endocrine) therapy

Hormone therapy uses synthetic hormones to block the effect of the body's natural hormones that help some cancers to grow. The treatment may be given as tablets or injections.

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### Targeted therapy

Targeted therapy uses drugs to attack specific genetic changes (mutations) within cells that allow cancers to grow and spread, while minimising harm to healthy cells. They are generally given in tablet form (orally), which can be taken at home. Not all cancers respond to targeted therapy.

### Immunotherapy

Immunotherapy uses drugs to stimulate the body's immune system to recognise and fight some types of cancer cells. These drugs are usually administered into a vein (intravenously).

### Common side effects

Many people undergoing cancer treatments experience side effects. Not everyone will have side effects or experience them to the same degree.

Common side effects include:

- fatigue
- difficulty with concentration and memory
- nausea and vomiting
- increased risk of infection
- hair loss
- diarrhoea
- joint aches and pains
- skin burns or soreness (from radiotherapy).

It is also not unusual for a person with cancer to feel sad or depressed during treatment and recovery. Counselling, with or without medication, can help. Nearly all side effects can be managed or controlled, but some may have an impact on the individual's ability to perform their usual job for a period of time. Talk with your employee about how you can support them to be most effective while at work.

### Managing working and treatment

It makes sense to talk to your employee about how they would like to manage work commitments during and after treatment. You can also discuss what might make it easier for the person to continue working, if that is their intention – for example, additional rest breaks, reduced hours, working from home or providing additional equipment. Check in with the person at regular intervals once treatment begins. Try to be flexible and change work plans if your employee's health or treatment change.

“The best thing my employer did was allow me to work when I could. I could focus my mind on something else, which was good for me. I will never forget they did that for me.” Jane

### Working after treatment

Some employees will have to deal with long-term physical and emotional side effects from their treatment, including fatigue, pain, changes to their appearance and memory problems. Some employees will feel ready to resume their old workload straight after treatment. Others will need your support to return to their usual role. Each situation will be different – talk to your employee about his or her capacity to undertake their usual tasks and the support you can provide.

### Employer obligations

Employers are legally obligated by the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate the effects of an employee's illness, as long as the adjustments do not cause an unjustifiable hardship to the business. These adjustments could be administrative, environmental or procedural, and they could be temporary or long-term. This may include making minor changes to your employee's work duties, reducing their work hours, providing flexible working arrangements, or providing additional equipment.

Employers have a duty of care to employees. If an employer feels that the employee is so unwell that being at work may pose a risk to the employee's wellbeing, the employer may direct the employee to go home and seek medical attention. An employer can also request a medical certificate stating that an employee is fit for work.

In addition to the protections provided by the *Disability Discrimination Act*, under the National Employment Standards employees who have at least 12 months of continuous service have the right to ask for flexible working arrangements. These may include allowing them to work from home or from another worksite; changing their start, finish or break times; or reducing their work hours. Employers can only refuse such requests on reasonable business grounds.

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### Tips and strategies for managers

- Plan for absences. The employee will probably need time off to attend medical appointments, and may have days when they are not well enough to work at all.
- It may be useful to ask the employee for a document outlining their expected treatment schedule, so that you have time to consider and organise any adjustments you as an employer need to make.
- If possible, suggest flexible work hours that will allow the employee to attend medical appointments and work when able.
- Be mindful that treatment can often run overtime and that an employee may sometimes be delayed at medical appointments.
- Temporarily reallocate or change some of the employee's usual duties to avoid very demanding tasks or schedules. Help the person prioritise the most important tasks.
- Encourage the employee to plan their work around when they have the most energy.
- If practical, enable the employee to work from home some of the time. Be mindful that this may be isolating and that there are workplace health and safety requirements involved with working from home.
- Allow the employee to have rest breaks, as needed, during the day.
- Arrange an ergonomics assessment to ensure that the employee's work environment is still appropriate, safe and comfortable.
- If your employee is taking time off, talk to them about setting up a system of staying in touch and the level of contact they would prefer.
- Talk to the employee about any assistance they may need to help them do their job and manage the side effects, e.g. voice-activated software, telephone headsets or a more supportive chair.
- If the employee works in a noisy area and is having difficulty concentrating, consider moving their workspace to a quieter location.
- If your organisation has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), encourage the employee to use its counselling services if they wish to do so.
- If possible, provide a parking space for your employee.
- Consider the allocation of work within the team — can some of the employee's tasks be reallocated to other team members?
- If your employee has to go home because they are unwell, offer a cab voucher or a lift to ensure a safe trip home.
- Because of the increased risk of infection, encourage colleagues who are ill to stay at home until they are fully recovered or relocate them away from the employee undergoing treatment.
- If an employee is having ongoing chemotherapy, they may need to dispose of waste at work. Their medical team will provide advice about how to safely dispose of waste or spills, but you may like to check whether your employee has any special requirements.
- Find out if your workplace has a return to work coordinator who could assist in the transition back to work.
- Discuss different options with the employee about returning to work after treatment. Options include returning to work gradually, starting back on light duties, being flexible with start and finish times, or providing additional rest breaks or time off to attend medical appointments.
- Contact the Australian Government's JobAccess service for advice and assistance. Their Employment Assistance Fund provides financial assistance to employers for work-related equipment, modifications and services for employees with disability. Go to [jobaccess.gov.au](http://jobaccess.gov.au) or call **1800 464 800**.

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### Leave entitlements

The amount of leave an individual will need will vary according to the type of cancer, its stage and the treatment required.

An employee may need to take a block of time off work to attend or recover from treatment, or may need to take time off periodically. For example, someone who has major surgery may need six weeks or more to recover, while someone undergoing radiotherapy may need to attend appointments every weekday for several weeks.

There are various leave options available under the National Employment Standards to help employees balance work and treatment.

Most permanent full-time employees are entitled to a minimum of 10 days' paid personal/carer's leave, which includes sick leave. Permanent part-time employees are entitled to a pro-rata amount of paid personal/carer's leave, based on the number of hours they work. Paid personal/carer's leave that is not used is carried over to subsequent years.

Generally, employees must then use their annual leave, and then any long service leave, before taking unpaid leave.

Employees are required to notify their employers of their inability to work as soon as practicable and should advise the employer of the expected period of leave. The employer may require evidence to substantiate the reason for the leave, such as a medical certificate or statutory declaration, as specified by the organisation's policies, employment contracts or relevant award.

### Where to get help and information

- **Workplace fact sheets** – *Cancer: an overview*, *Cancer myths and facts* and *Creating cancer-friendly workplaces*. These online only 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 *Understanding Radiotherapy*, *Understanding Chemotherapy* and *Understanding Surgery* booklets, or download digital copies from your local Cancer Council website.
- **Fair Work Ombudsman** – [fairwork.gov.au](http://fairwork.gov.au); 13 13 94
- **Australian Human Rights Commission** – [humanrights.gov.au](http://humanrights.gov.au); 1300 656 419

### Cancer Council websites

ACT..... [actcancer.org](http://actcancer.org)  
 NSW ..... [cancercouncil.com.au](http://cancercouncil.com.au)  
 NT..... [nt.cancer.org.au](http://nt.cancer.org.au)  
 Queensland..... [cancerqld.org.au](http://cancerqld.org.au)  
 SA..... [cancersa.org.au](http://cancersa.org.au)  
 Tasmania..... [cancertas.org.au](http://cancertas.org.au)  
 Victoria..... [cancervic.org.au](http://cancervic.org.au)  
 WA..... [cancerwa.asn.au](http://cancerwa.asn.au)  
 Australia..... [cancer.org.au](http://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.