

Supporting working carers

A guide for managers and human resources professionals

Many people who care for someone with cancer are also employed. Your employees will need your support to help them balance their caring responsibilities with their job duties. Providing this support can help you to retain experienced staff, foster organisational loyalty and increase staff morale. This fact sheet provides some suggestions about how to help your employees manage working and caring.

Who is a working carer?

A working carer is a person who combines paid employment with unpaid care and support to someone with an illness or disability, such as cancer. A carer may be looking after their spouse or partner, parent or in-law, child, grandparent, sibling, other close relative, friend or neighbour.

Often the person becomes the primary carer of the person with cancer without necessarily identifying as a “carer”. Rather, the carer may see it as simply helping out a family member or friend in need.

Many workers become carers. In fact, the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that almost three-quarters (75%) of the 3 million carers in Australia are also in paid employment.¹ Balancing caring and working puts extra demands on an employee’s time and energy. A supportive work environment can make it easier for a working carer to manage the situation.

“At first, I didn’t ask for help, because I didn’t want to bother anyone. I see caring as my duty; I have to do it. I now realise people genuinely want to help. They need my help to show them how.” GAVIN

The carer’s juggling act

Caring often involves a wide range of tasks, including practical, medical, emotional, legal and financial support. These may include:

Driving the person with cancer to medical appointments



Shopping, cooking and cleaning



Minding children or pets



Caring can also be an emotional roller-coaster. An employee looking after someone with cancer may feel grief, fear, loneliness, frustration, guilt or anger about the situation. Some research shows that carers are more likely to experience depression than the person diagnosed with cancer.

► Cancer Council has episodes about carers in the podcast series *The Thing About Cancer* and *The Thing About Advanced Cancer*.

Supporting carers

Carers are not legally required to tell their employers about their caring responsibilities. An employee might avoid telling their employer about their caring responsibilities because they fear it may negatively affect their employment. If you are aware that an employee is caring for someone with cancer, you can offer support. What is possible will vary depending on the employee's role.

- Ask whether the working carer wants to share the situation with co-workers, and if so, agree on how it should be communicated.
- Facilitate any requests for flexible work hours if possible, so that the carer can attend medical appointments or pick up children if required.
- Discuss what leave the working carer is likely to take so that you can plan to cover any absences. Check they are aware of their leave entitlements.
- Make a record of any agreed changes to the employee's working arrangements or conditions.
- Keep in mind that the carer may need time off at short notice. Treatment schedules, for example, do not always go exactly as planned.
- Enable the carer to work from home sometimes if possible. Be aware of the workplace health and safety requirements of working from home.
- If appropriate and the carer agrees, consider whether it is possible to temporarily reallocate some of their normal work duties.
- If your workplace has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), ensure EAP personnel have appropriate information about managing cancer at work, and encourage the carer to access the counselling service. As a manager, you may also find it helpful to use the EAP counselling service.
- Regularly check in with the carer to discuss how any flexible arrangements are working out, and adjust if necessary.

Who is covered?

Under the *Fair Work Act 2009*, carer's leave is available for:

- **immediate family members** – an employee's spouse, de facto partner, child, parent, grandparent, grandchild, sibling (or the child, parent, grandparent, grandchild or sibling of the employee's spouse or de facto partner)
- **household members** – any person, related or not, who lives with the employee.

Leave entitlements in Australia

Personal/carer's leave

Under the National Employment Standards, most permanent full-time employees are entitled to a minimum of 10 days of paid personal/carer's leave each year. Permanent part-time employees are entitled to a pro rata (proportional) amount of paid personal/carer's leave, based on the number of hours they work. Unused leave days carry over from year to year.

Annual leave

Carers may also use their annual leave (4 weeks a year for most full-time employees and pro rata for part-time employees), then any long service leave to which they're entitled.

Unpaid leave

Once paid personal/carer's leave has been used, each time the person requires care, the carer is entitled to an additional 2 days of unpaid carer's leave for caring duties. Both casual and permanent employees are entitled to unpaid carer's leave. Some individual employers also provide additional unpaid carer's leave.

Compassionate leave

Permanent employees are also entitled to 2 days of paid compassionate leave to spend time with a member of their immediate family who has a life-threatening illness, regardless of whether the employee is the person's carer. Casual employees are entitled to unpaid compassionate leave.

An employee is required to notify their employer of their inability to work as soon as practicable. The employer may require written proof for the leave (e.g. a medical certificate or statutory declaration), as specified by the organisation's policies, awards, contracts or workplace agreements.

The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* also protects carers of people with cancer from workplace discrimination. This includes family members (spouse, de facto partner and other relatives) and unrelated carers who provide assistance to a person affected by cancer. Contact your state or territory anti-discrimination organisation to see whether they provide similar protection.

Employer obligations

Employers are legally obligated by the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate employees with carer's responsibilities, if requested by the employee, 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. They could include making minor changes to your employee's work duties, reducing their work hours, approving flexible working arrangements or providing additional equipment. Seek advice from your human resources department or adviser about adjustments in specific cases.

In addition to the protections provided by the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, under the National Employment Standards, employees who have at least 12 months of continuous service have the right to request flexible working arrangements to manage caring responsibilities.

Flexible working arrangements may include allowing employees to work from home or from another worksite; changing their start, finish or break times; or allowing employees to reduce their work hours. Employers can only refuse such requests on reasonable business grounds.

“The best thing my employer did was allow me to work when I could. I could focus my mind on something else.” SANDRA

Acknowledgements

This fact sheet has been developed by Cancer Council NSW on behalf of all other state and territory Cancer Councils as part of a National Cancer Information Subcommittee initiative. We thank the expert and consumer reviewers of this fact sheet and also the experts, consumers and editorial teams who have worked on current and previous versions of this information

[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 independent advice relevant to your specific situation from appropriate

This fact sheet is funded through the generosity of the people of Australia. To support Cancer Council, call your local Cancer Council or visit your local website.



Cancer Council acknowledges Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to Elders past, present and emerging.



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 on cancer treatments and side effects, or 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.

Carer Gateway	1800 422 737 carergateway.gov.au
Carers Australia	1800 242 636 carersaustralia.com.au
Australian Human Rights Commission	1300 656 419 humanrights.gov.au
Fair Work Ombudsman	13 13 94 fairwork.gov.au

Workplace fact sheets – Other workplace fact sheets, such as *Creating cancer-friendly workplaces*, *Supporting a co-worker with cancer*, *Talking to an employee about cancer* and *Death and bereavement*, are available on your local Cancer Council website.

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References

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *4430.0 Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings*, 2018. Available from: www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release#carers.