

**For your team's wellbeing.**



# Supporting employees who are living with cancer.

A photograph of a woman with blonde hair tied back in a ponytail, wearing a grey cardigan. She is holding a white mug with both hands and looking out of a window to her right. The background is a bright, slightly blurred office interior.

Here, we'll look at how you can support employees who are living with cancer at work, including returning to work when they're ready.

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# Cancer and the workplace: what's the issue?

At the last count, the number of work-aged people (16 to 65) living with cancer in the UK was estimated at 890,000. And what's more, by 2030 this number is expected to rise to an extraordinary 1.1 million. With so many people affected, it's no wonder why this is such an issue for employers.

Understanding how best to help your employees is important, but cancer is complex. For most, cancer is life-changing – it affects both their personal and professional lives and brings with it lots of challenges along the way. Someone who has been diagnosed with cancer may be dealing with the effects of treatment or the cancer itself.

They may be worrying about their financial position, or overwhelmed by the number of important decisions they're faced with. Understanding what your employee is dealing with and how they may be feeling can help you to help them.

## The importance of helping your employees at work

Continuing to work after being diagnosed with cancer isn't suitable for everyone. But research from Macmillan Cancer Support found that nearly nine in every 10 people diagnosed felt that it was important.

Of the people Macmillan spoke to, six in 10 said work was important because it gave them a sense of normality. Again, about six in 10 said work helped them to keep up morale and self-esteem. About four in 10 said work also plays a big role in how they define and identify themselves.

Overall, helping your employees back to work when they feel able and ready can make a big difference to their health and wellbeing.

For you as an employer, it's also beneficial. By supporting your employees during their diagnosis and return to work, you can:

- retain their valuable knowledge and skill
- relieve pressure on existing members of staff who would otherwise need to take on additional work or train new employees

Despite this, almost nine in 10 managers say they have not been given any training on how to support people with long-term conditions including cancer.

Source: Macmillan Cancer Support. The Rich Picture: People of Working Age with Cancer, 2017

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# What you can do to help

## Know what you're dealing with

If you don't know much about a type of cancer, its treatment or side-effects, look it up. Knowledge is key to helping you understand the situation and manage it appropriately. You can find out more about cancer by visiting [bupa.co.uk/cancer](https://www.bupa.co.uk/cancer)

Or, better still, ask your employee how the cancer or its treatment may affect them at work. It's important to remember that cancer treatments can affect people differently.

## Communicate

It's important to keep conversation open and accessible – try to be understanding when you communicate and remember to listen. Ask your employee how they would like to be contacted and make sure you keep in touch when they're away. Remember, how they like to be contacted could change, so make sure you keep up-to-date.

## Approach the situation with sensitivity and respect

Not everyone who has cancer feels comfortable talking about it – everyone deals with it differently. Your employee may not want their colleagues to know and, if they do, it's important to discuss how to go about this. Help your team to understand the situation and be as supportive as possible. Remember that people living with cancer are protected against discrimination in the workplace under the Equality Act (or in Northern Ireland, the Disability Discrimination Act). That means employers have a legal duty of care in this regard.

## Be accommodating

You'll need to discuss any reasonable adjustments with your employee – it's your duty. This may include things like:

- allowing your employee to take time off for medical appointments
- encouraging them to work more flexible hours, so they can work when they feel most up to it and avoid difficult travelling times
- adapting their role and duties to suit their needs – it's a good idea to also revisit any performance objectives and alter them to accommodate the change in circumstance
- suggesting they take extra breaks if they feel tired – fatigue is a common effect of cancer and cancer treatments
- allowing them to work from home if this helps

Remember to check your company policies or guidelines to help you manage the situation appropriately.

**85% of people diagnosed with cancer felt that it was important to continue to work.**

Macmillan Cancer Support. The Rich Picture: People of Working Age with Cancer, 2017



## Plan for their return

Work together with your employee to create a plan for their return and always be guided by their needs. Keep in mind that, although they may be eager to get back to work, it's often hard to gauge how tiring it can actually be. They may also be worried about getting back up to speed with changes since they've been gone, so be sensitive to this. Remember to consider any reasonable adjustments such as a phased return to help build in some flexibility each week. Make sure that their workload is manageable and follow their lead around what they do and don't feel capable of doing to ensure a smooth return.

Consider any other adjustments your employee may need. For example, some chemotherapy medicines can cause a loss of sensitivity in the fingers and feet, making computer work difficult. If the situation arises, perhaps consider voice-activated software or the option to work from home if commuting is difficult.

## Organise a catch up

Some cancer treatments can cause changes in appearance, such as hair loss. This can often make people worried about how their colleagues will respond or treat them on their



### Useful links

Macmillan Cancer Support has a wealth of information around dealing with work and cancer. You can also sign up to Macmillan at Work to receive training, resources and advice to help you support staff affected by cancer. Visit [www.macmillan.org.uk/work-and-cancer](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/work-and-cancer) for more information.

We have information on how to cope with cancer and work at [bupa.co.uk/health-information](http://bupa.co.uk/health-information). This information may help you to understand the work-related challenges your employee faces following their diagnosis.

return. Having a conversation about their return to work before it happens can help to ease these concerns.

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