



Supporting your  
team with cancer

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# Supporting employees who are living with cancer

It's important to know how you can best support employees who are living with cancer at work. Here, we look at ways you can help your employees if they're able to keep working and how to support their return if they do take time off.





## Cancer and the workplace

For most people, cancer will be life changing. It affects both people's personal and professional lives and brings with it lots of challenges along the way. Someone with cancer may be dealing with the effects of treatment as well as the cancer itself. They may be worrying about money 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.

**It's estimated that there are over 890,000 working-aged people (16 to 65) living with cancer in the UK, and this number is set to rise to 1,150,000 by 2030.**







## Staying in work

Not everybody wants to continue working with cancer, and others won't be able to. But work can provide some normality and routine, and boost self-esteem. Helping your employees stay in work, or come back to work when they feel able, can make a big difference to their health and wellbeing

### By supporting those employees who want to stay in their role, you can also:

- retain their valuable knowledge and skills
- avoid having to train new employees
- avoid other team members having to increase their workload



# 87%

of employed people say it was important for them to continue working after they were diagnosed with cancer.





## What help are people entitled to?

It's important to know that living with cancer is considered a disability in UK law. This means people can't be discriminated against because of their diagnosis. As an employer, this also means you have to make reasonable adjustments to help people do their jobs.

### Reasonable adjustments may include things like:

- allowing them to take time off for medical appointments
- encouraging them to work more flexible hours so they can work when they feel able to
- adapting their role and duties to suit their needs, as well as updating any performance objectives
- suggesting they take extra breaks if they feel tired or need a rest, or work from home if they can.

### You should also discuss any services available through your workplace that might be helpful to them. This includes:

- occupational health
- human resources
- a trade union representative
- an employee assistance programme (EAP)

Make sure that your employee understands what they'll be paid if they need to take sick leave. If you have an occupational or company sick pay policy, make sure you explain whether this is instead of Statutory sick pay, or on top of it.



## What might people need help with?

**Cancer, and some of the treatments for it, can cause physical side-effects. This might impact on somebody's ability to work, or work in the same way as before their diagnosis. These include:**

- pain
- fatigue or weight changes
- digestive problems, such as sickness, nausea and diarrhoea
- hair loss
- a weakened immune system

**As well as these physical side-effects, cancer diagnosis and treatment can affect a person's mental health. People might experience a range of emotional responses to being diagnosed with cancer and to the treatment they need, including:**

- depression
- anxiety
- feelings of fear, anger, shock and guilt
- feeling isolated and alone

These vary from person to person. It's important to have sensitive conversations and understand that your employee's symptoms, feelings, and preferences might change over time.

# Conversations about cancer

Cancer is an emotional subject, and you might be worried about how to talk about it in a sensitive and professional way. But don't avoid talking about cancer, even if it makes you feel uncomfortable. If you're having conversations about cancer, here are some things to keep in mind.



## 1. Be respectful

It's important to keep conversations open, sensitive, and respectful. Try to be understanding when you communicate and remember to listen. Some people might like to bring a friend or family member with them to provide emotional support during certain conversations.



## 2. Be willing to learn

If you don't know much about a type of cancer, its treatment, or side-effects, look it up. If they don't mind, ask your employee to explain how the cancer or its treatment might affect them. It's important to remember that cancer treatments can affect people differently. You should also bear in mind that they might not yet be sure how it will affect them. Asking your employee can be a good way to learn, however they shouldn't be solely relied upon to educate you about their condition. They're unlikely to be an expert in cancer, and they may not wish to share personal details. You can find out more about cancer by visiting [www.bupa.co.uk/health-information/cancer](http://www.bupa.co.uk/health-information/cancer)



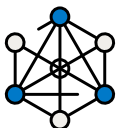
## 3. Be discreet

Some people with cancer may not want their colleagues to know. And, even if they do, it's important to discuss how their colleagues are told. Some people would rather tell people themselves, while others would prefer it to be communicated by a manager or colleague.



## 4. Be supportive

As well as being there for the team member who is living with cancer, try to help everyone else understand the situation as best you can too. If other team members are being told about the person's diagnosis, they might also have mixed emotions, concerns, and questions for you.



## 5. Stay connected

If your employee will be having time away from work, ask them how they would like to be contacted. Make sure you keep in touch when they're away, but don't make them feel pressured to return. It's important to ask how frequently they would like to be contacted, and in what way. Remember this could change.



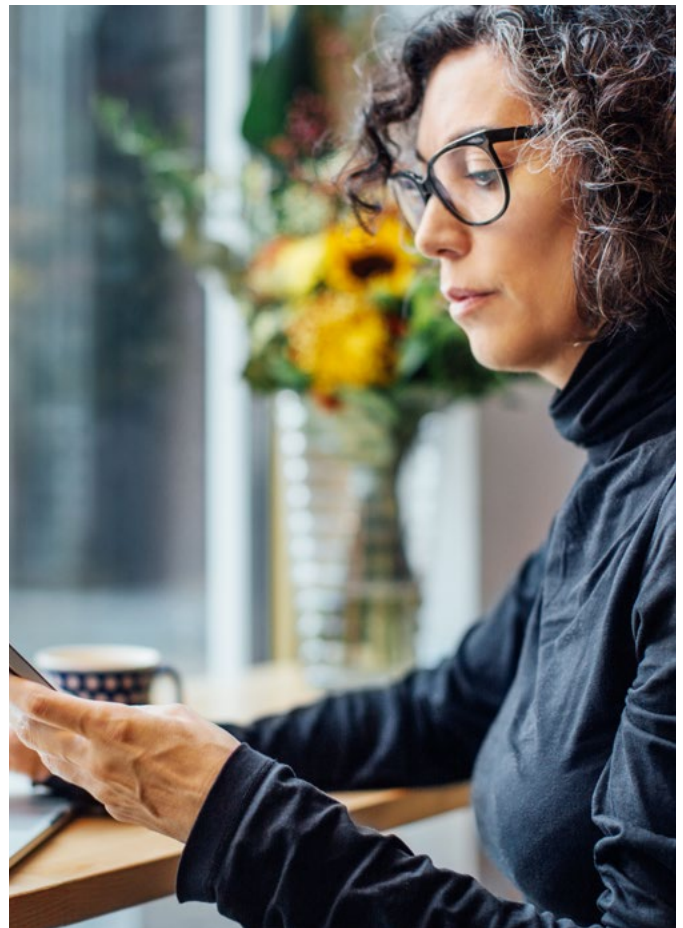
# What should I do to prepare for their return?

It's important that both you and your employee feel ready for them to come back to work. When you're having these conversations, there are some important things to consider.

- Talk about any reasonable adjustments they may need when they return, such as flexible hours or extra breaks.
- Although people may want to get back to work, it can be hard for them to know how tiring they will find it, so try and start slowly.
- Make sure that their workload is manageable, and that they know they can speak to you if they're struggling.
- They may still have to attend regular appointments with their doctor or to see a counsellor.
- Remember that people's physical and mental health might change over time, so adjustments may also need to change.
- Cancer can be a long-term condition for some people, so any planning around work may need to be with a long-term view.

Going back to work can feel daunting, so it's important to try and understand any concerns your employee has. For example, some cancer treatments can cause changes to their appearance, such as hair loss, which can make people worried about how their colleagues will perceive them. Having a conversation about their return to work before it happens can help to ease these concerns.

Even if you've kept in touch, people might worry they have missed out on changes that have happened while they've been away. Talk about anything that may be different when they return before they start working again.





# Resources

## Further resources:

Bupa's cancer information hub:

[www.bupa.co.uk/health-information/cancer](http://www.bupa.co.uk/health-information/cancer)

Macmillan's work and cancer resources:

[www.macmillan.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/how-we-work/work-and-cancer](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/how-we-work/work-and-cancer)

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