

A guide for employers

How cancer affects people

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1 How cancer affects people

Cancer will affect people in many different ways, depending on the individual, the type of cancer they have and how it is being treated, and where they are on their cancer journey. How it will affect their working lives will vary widely.

When facing cancer, some people embrace work as a way of feeling 'normal' and in control.⁷ Sometimes, carrying on with or returning to work can have an emotional benefit for individuals while they wait for a diagnosis, have treatment, or care for a loved one. For others, working is a financial necessity and a period of prolonged absence would create financial hardship.

Some people give up their jobs because their cancer is severe or symptoms make it impossible to work. The effects of treatment leave some people unable to work. Others may resign because their self-esteem or confidence has been damaged.

As a manager, you may be one of your employee's most important sources of support. You don't need to be a medical expert, but a basic understanding of cancer and its treatment can help you fulfil that role. This knowledge will allow you to plan for and recognise issues that may emerge at work.

What is cancer?

Cancer occurs when cells – the building blocks of the body's organs and tissues – grow and divide abnormally. Cancer is not a single disease with a single cause or treatment. There are more than 200 different types of cancer, each with its own name and treatment. Some causes are known, but often the doctors simply can't say why a person has cancer.

The aims of treatment are different depending on the type of cancer, how far advanced it is, and the individual's overall health. Treatment may be given to cure a cancer, or to slow its progress and help relieve symptoms.

FOR MORE INFORMATION | To find out more about different types of cancers and the different treatments, visit our website at [macmillan.org.uk/aboutcancer](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/aboutcancer)

For further information, you can also phone Macmillan's free and confidential cancer information nurse helpline on **0808 808 00 00**, (9am–8pm, Mon–Fri).

⁷ Amir Z, Moran T, Walshe L, Iddenden R et al. Return to paid work after cancer: A British experience. *Journal of Cancer Survivorship*. 2007; 1: 129-131. (For a report on the research, see also: Macmillan Cancer Support. *The road to recovery: Getting back to work*. 2007. Available at www.macmillan.org.uk).

Emotions

Going for tests and waiting to hear the results can be an anxious time. Deep emotions can overwhelm people during this stage. Many employees may wish to keep their situation confidential at this point. If they tell you what is happening, you can respond appropriately to their need for time off to attend medical appointments.

When someone receives a cancer diagnosis, the shock can make them feel numb at first. Some people can take a while to accept the fact that they have cancer and they may try to carry on as if nothing is wrong. Other emotions that people experience include:

- anger or bitterness
- sadness
- fear of the disease, treatment and dying
- loneliness and isolation.

If your employee hears that they have, or a loved one has a cancer diagnosis, they may need some time off to be with their family and collect themselves before coming back in to work.

Hearing that a previous cancer has recurred can also be devastating news for your employee, particularly if they face more treatment or if their medical options are becoming limited.

Uncertainty is one of the most emotionally difficult aspects of cancer. Doctors can't tell a person exactly what will happen. Some people manage this by taking one day at a time, not looking too far into the future.

Sometimes cancer puts people on an emotional rollercoaster. Distress can hit them out of the blue. If this happens to your employee, it might help to offer them a private space for a while. You may suggest they go home for the rest of the day. Ask if they would like you to call a relative or friend to come and travel with them.

Your own emotions

You and your colleagues may also have strong feelings – this is only natural. Don't hesitate to ask for support in dealing with emotions of your own. Within the limits of confidentiality, it may help to talk to another manager in your workplace. You can also call our freephone Macmillan Support Line on **0808 808 00 00**. We are here to help anyone who is affected by cancer – including you.

Fatigue

Fatigue is a common symptom of cancer and its treatment. For some people, it is a daily experience. It can be worse at different stages of treatment, or at different times of the day. Fatigue manifests itself in many ways and might persist long after treatment is over. It might mean your employee:

- finds it harder to perform certain tasks
- has less strength and energy than before
- has difficulty concentrating or remembering things
- becomes exhausted during meetings or after light activity
- struggles to control their emotions
- experiences dizziness or is 'light-headed' from time to time.

Fatigue, together with the other effects of cancer and its treatments, may mean that your employee might be unable to work for long periods. Tiredness can also make people irritable and affect how they relate to other people.

You can help your employee to cope with fatigue by offering various adjustments. Flexible working, working from home, reduced hours or lighter duties are a few of the options outlined later in this booklet. Simple steps like rest breaks or a short walk outdoors can really help.

If your employee is caring for someone with cancer, their loved one's fatigue can have an impact on them too. It can increase their need for time off so they can attend to caring responsibilities.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To find out more about coping with fatigue, see our website [macmillan.org.uk/fatigue](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/fatigue) you can also order our booklet *Coping with fatigue* at [be.macmillan.org.uk](https://www.be.macmillan.org.uk) or call **0808 808 00 00**.

Effects of treatment

There are many different kinds of treatment for cancer. Just what treatment your employee needs will depend on the kind of cancer and its stage (whether it has spread or not).

The three most common treatments are surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy. Sometimes a person may have more than one type of treatment.

Some people are surprised to find they have few problems with treatment. Other people may have significant symptoms from their cancer or side effects from treatment. Symptoms can build up over a period of time or change as treatment cycles progress. These can vary widely, depending on the individual's situation. Pain, skin reactions, poor appetite and nausea are a few examples. Your employee's medical team should offer them advice and possibly medicines to minimise symptoms and side effects like nausea, loss of appetite and fatigue. Try to make it easy for them to cope with their symptoms and side effects in the workplace. For example, frequent breaks to eat small snacks, access to a fridge or an alteration in their uniform might make life easier.

Cancer and its treatment can cause physical changes, so you and your colleagues may need to be prepared for this. Again, it depends on the individual. Obvious changes can include:

- hair loss
- changes in complexion or skin tone
- scarring
- altered appearance after surgery
- weight loss or gain.

Some phases of treatment can affect the person's immune system, making them more vulnerable to infection.

People who have finished treatment may not find it easy returning to normal life. They may struggle with emotions and fatigue, or need to adjust to changes that treatment has made to their body. Some treatments leave people with long-term side effects. Some individuals may be living with the knowledge that their cancer cannot be cured, even if they feel healthy. Many cancer survivors want to get back to work but may have difficulties in returning to their old jobs. They will need your understanding and support to do this successfully.

If your employee is a carer

Becoming a carer is often unexpected and can be one of life's most emotional and physically demanding roles. Sometimes it is hard to juggle caring and employment at the same time.

Caring responsibilities may cause a problem with absences. For example, an employee might take sick leave when a crisis occurs, rather than ask for time off to care for someone with cancer. Often this is because people wrongly believe their caring role is not a legitimate reason to request leave. Being a carer can have an impact on both physical and emotional health. This can affect the carer's ability to work.

Cancer can be a fluctuating condition, with long cycles of treatment, often requiring outpatient appointments. Carers may need time off work at short notice. Side effects and symptoms can persist after treatment so the need for flexibility may remain for some time.

Your employee's commitment to their job and colleagues may mean they feel guilty if they are unable to complete their usual work. Caring responsibilities may also affect how an employee views their own career development. They may feel discouraged about seeking promotion or applying for a new job. Being a carer should not adversely affect an employee's longer-term job prospects, and it will be helpful if you can provide reassurance about this. Your employee will also appreciate it if you can explain the options for leave, your organisation's policies and their rights under current legislation (see page 15).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Your employee may benefit from further support. He or she is welcome to contact Macmillan's free and confidential helpline on **0808 808 00 00** for information and details of local self-help and support groups.

Macmillan also produces a booklet called *Working while caring for someone with cancer*.

This is available from **be.macmillan.org.uk** or by calling **0808 808 00 00**.

Macmillan also has a guide for carers, *Hello, and how are you?* It includes a section on employment as well as information about emotions, relationships and other issues. It can be found at **macmillan.org.uk/carers** or ordered from **be.macmillan.org.uk** or by calling **0808 808 00 00**.

Other useful contacts include:

Carers Direct
(a service provided by the NHS)
Helpline **0808 802 0202**
www.nhs.uk/carersdirect

Carers UK
Helpline 0808 808 7777
www.carersuk.org

The Princess Royal Trust for Carers
www.carers.org