



Guide for Employers

When an employee is diagnosed with a blood cancer or related condition, the individual is likely to undergo an enormous amount of stress.

Not only does the diagnosis have an impact on the individual and their family, it also has an impact on employers, the workplace and their working relationships.

You might think that work is insignificant in situations such as this; however, in most cases, work is important to a patient's identity. Work allows the person to reconnect with society and regain a sense of normality which can be crucial in their recovery. It's important that the situation is managed with care and that communication channels are kept open between employee and employer.

An employee in this situation may be looking for practical support from their employer. It is important to respond to the diagnosis carefully and realise that cancer is not necessarily a death sentence. With recent major medical advances, many patients can be cured and go on to live a long, healthy life after their diagnosis.

The journey to recovery is long and taxing for impacted individuals, as well as their support systems and carers. The care employers provide during this challenging time can make all the difference.

Tips for the first conversation

- Discussing illness of any kind can be challenging. Enter the conversation mentally prepared to set a supportive tone in a comfortable and relaxed environment. Listen carefully and focus on the employee's individual circumstances. Seek clarity on how they'd like to approach work whilst recovering. Listen carefully and take notes. Provide reassurance where you can. Feel free to come back to the employee if you don't know the answer right away.
- Review your employee's rights and entitlements outlined in their individual employment agreement. Print out a copy for them to also have and bring it to the meeting. Seek support from your HR person if the employee wishes to formalise the conversation. Familiarise yourself with the employee's employment contract and the broader sick leave policies of your organisation, and come prepared to discuss the practicalities of the employee's recovery journey.

- Clarify whether the employee wants their colleagues to know about the diagnosis to ensure their privacy is respected. Create a plan of communication to colleagues about absence that both parties agree on.
- Request that the employee provide medical documentation confirming the diagnosis and the treatment. These documents will need to be forwarded onto HR so they can process the relevant leave types.
- Ensure they know who they can talk to with any concerns, e.g. you, their HR rep, Employee Assistance etc.

Work adjustments during and after treatment

If your employee continues to work, one option to consider is flexible working arrangements to allow for treatment and recovery.

Flexibility provides the opportunity for patients or carers to manage work and health appointments/treatment schedules in a way that works for them. This can help them stay connected to work as they recover or care for their loved ones.

Flexible working arrangements are instrumental when employees are dealing with challenging personal circumstances – and are a known retention strategy for employers who offer them.

What type of flexibility might work for your employee?

1. Ad hoc / temporary flexibility

There are many occasions where your employee might request ad hoc flexibility, for example, to attend a health appointment, work from home occasionally, avoid traffic congestion or take a delivery.

This also includes temporary flexibility arrangements. For example, they could go for treatment or take their family member to treatment every Tuesday morning for 3-4 months and, if they are able, make up the hours later at an agreed-upon time.

Ad hoc / temporary flexible arrangements are appropriate where the arrangement has an end date within 6 months. As the employee will not be changing hours worked, generally these sorts of arrangements do not require a formal change in working conditions, contract or payment terms, and can be arranged by speaking to their manager on an as-needed basis.

If these ad-hoc changes in hours start to become more frequent after the six-month period, or they result in a change of working pattern/hours for the employee, a conversation will need to be had with the employee about potentially moving down to part-time hours to accommodate for their time off. Also, as the employer, you may choose to grant discretionary leave should you feel the circumstances warrant the additional hours/days off work.

2. Regular flexibility

Regular flexibility refers to arrangements where the employee is looking for a regular pattern of flexible work that is likely to continue for six months or more.

For example, they may continue to work contracted hours with regular periods working from home, or with adjusted hours to accommodate treatment or caring responsibilities. Regular flexible working arrangements do not generally involve a contractual variation.

3. Formal flexibility

Formal flexible working focuses on arrangements that trigger a change to the employee's current employment agreement. For example, reducing hours from full-time to a part-time working arrangement. If your employee is interested in considering formal flexibility, they will need to complete a Flexible Working Arrangement Employee Request Form and arrange an appointment with their manager to discuss how this might work. If the employee's request is approved, a formal variation to their current employment agreement will need to be signed.

Top tips for employers

1. **Be aware of temporary side effects** caused by cancer/treatments such as:
 - Fatigue – ensure they know they can take regular breaks
 - Temporary difficulties with memory and concentration
 - Sensitivity to strong smells such as strong perfume or chemical products
2. **Schedule regular catch-ups with your employee** to talk about their work and how they are managing. Try to be available when your employee needs to chat to you. These conversations can determine if the employee is overworked and/or when they are ready to take on extra responsibilities. Discuss:
 - Days off work for treatments and appointments
 - Scheduling work hours around times when they have the most energy
 - Do they need to reduce working hours, workload or job-share?
 - Do they need a work from home arrangement if possible?
3. **Ensure other employees in the workplace are coping** and have the right support if workload has increased
4. **Make sure emergency contact details are up to date**
5. **Be mindful that your employee may not wish to work** – or they may be physically unable to work during their treatment and recovery. If this is the case, then you will need to ensure you create a plan together about how you will manage this absence, with both parties agreeing to keep each other informed with any updated information. The key here is open communication and making a plan. It's

okay if the plan changes, but having it in place is vital for the employer from a business continuity perspective whilst the employee recovers.

6. **Create a clear 'return-to-work plan'** - If your employee has taken time out of work, once they have recovered and been cleared by their medical team as "fit to return to work", ensure you create a clear return-to-work plan that both of you agree to. This can include:

- The type of work (duties) they can perform
- Consider flexible working options
- Discussing the importance of having regular breaks and self-care
- Ensure there are regular meetings in place so the employee feels supported and has a chance to vocalise any questions or concerns they may have
- Ensure the employee doesn't feel pressured to return to work post-recovery.

7. **Remember it is a big step for someone returning to work after a blood cancer diagnosis or related condition.** They will need some time to settle back into the working environment, especially as many will have a changed life perspective post-diagnosis.

Ensure you have all their up-to-date medical documentation. This includes their medical certificates whilst recovering, as well as their 'fit to return to work' documentation. Often, medical documents can be hard to decipher – feel free to reach out to your HR department who can guide you on the particulars i.e., leave types, reduced hours etc.