# Cancer

## Colleague toolkit

## 1 Understanding cancer

Cancer occurs when cells in a specific part of the body grow and divide abnormally, which then invade and destroy surrounding healthy tissue. They can also spread to other parts of the body in a process known as metastasis.[1]

There are more than 200 different types of 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 gain remission from a cancer, or to slow its progress and help relieve symptoms.

### Emotional effects[2]

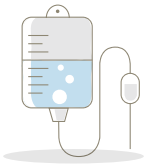
Receiving a cancer diagnosis can come as a shock for some people, while others may try to carry on as if nothing is wrong. Common emotions that people experience include:

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

### Physical effects[2]

Fatigue is a common symptom of cancer and its treatment. It can be worse at different stages of treatment, or at different times of the day. Fatigue manifests itself in many ways and might continue long after treatment is over. It might mean your colleague:

- find 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



### Effects of treatment[2]

Cancer and its treatment can often cause physical changes, so you and your team may need to think about how you will cope with this. Although 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

[1] NHS - www.nhs.uk/conditions/cancer/ | [2] Macmillan Cancer Support - www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support

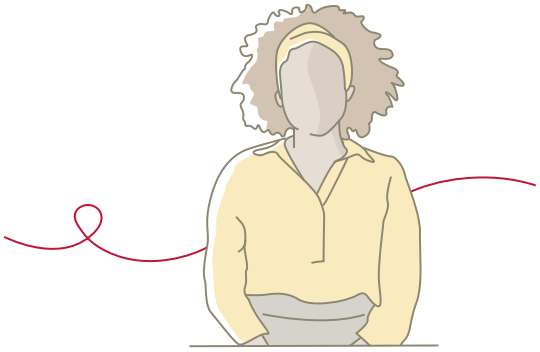
## 2 Supporting a colleague

In the UK, everyone with a cancer diagnosis is protected by the Equality Act (Northern Ireland - Disability Discrimination Act 1994) and this provides lifelong protection. Cancer fundamentally changes lives, both for the individual affected and those around them. Aside from the physical impact, it can drive a complete change of focus and priorities.

Work can play an important role during and after cancer. It can provide a sense of identity, purpose and normality, as well as supporting financially. Many people value the opportunity to think about something else other than their cancer. If you want to offer help to your colleague, suggest practical things you can do, perhaps work-related or domestic things like giving lifts or making a meal for the family.

Everyone is different, so be careful not to judge your colleague's choice or capacity for work compared to past experiences.

Whilst the focus of the organisation will be on the individual with cancer, the impact on their colleagues should not be forgotten. They can experience a wide range of emotions and be impacted practically. Speak to your line manager or HR team if you need support.



## 3 Understanding side effects

**Living with uncertainty**

Side effects can be many and varied. They can be physical and emotional, short-term and long-term. Many are not visible to others and some can be personal, such as:

Your colleague's ability at work is likely to be affected. For example, they may have difficulty concentrating for long periods, find travelling difficult, be less able physically or suffer from low confidence or self-esteem.

You should also remember that the emotional impact of cancer often continues long after physical surgery and treatment, if not forever. Don't assume that if your colleague looks OK then they are back to normal. Cancer survivors often live with uncertainty and fear of the cancer returning.

## 4 What to say and what not to say

It can be difficult to know what to say to someone who is going through cancer. To some extent it depends on how well you know the person and it's OK to admit that you don't know what to say.

You may have your own emotions about your colleague's cancer and be concerned about the impact at work with a key person missing - this is OK too.

It's important that you acknowledge your colleague's cancer, but care is needed.

**Some things you could say are:**

+ I'm not sure what to say, but I wanted to tell you that I'm thinking about you
+ Is there anything at all I can do to help you? - Be prepared to help if asked
+ Would you like to keep in touch whilst you're off work? And if so how, how often etc.
+ How are you? - this simple phrase shows you care and allows your colleague to tell you as much or as little as they wish

**Avoid phrases such as:**

– I know how you feel
– You'll be fine
– When my friend had it…

Your colleague may not say much in response, but they will appreciate your concern and support. Others may welcome the opportunity to talk at length, so make sure you have the time to listen.

Remember to continue to ask from time to time at suitable opportunities including after they have returned to work. Recovery from cancer is a very long process.

## 5 How to support a colleague returning to work

Your colleague may be returning to work during cancer treatment, afterwards or whilst living long-term with cancer. They may look well on the surface but be aware of the danger of assuming they are OK and back to normal - they may never be.

Remember each person's cancer experience is different, including how they've dealt with it or are dealing with it, so there's no one-size-fits-all approach.

As a colleague, you can support an individual's return to work in many ways, such as:

+ Being clear on your colleagues wishes about how they want to be treated, whether they want to talk about their cancer or not
+ Consider having one person in the team to communicate with your colleague about their cancer rather than them being bombarded by lots of people
+ Suggest a break-the-ice social visit to the office prior to returning to work
+ Ensure they are expected on day one and they are brought up to speed with relevant changes during their absence
+ Suggest social opportunities such as coffee or lunch to catch-up with key colleagues
+ Asking (not assuming) what would most help your colleague
+ Be prepared to be flexible and accommodating within the team long-term

Remember that recovery from cancer is a long-term process and for many, life will never be the same. There may be permanent changes affecting your colleague at work and they are likely to be living with worries and uncertainty about cancer returning.

If you've been affected personally by your colleague's cancer, make sure to look after yourself too. Reach out to your line manager or HR team and find out more about the support available through your organisation.

### Other helpful resources

Canada Life's Cancer Resources
**www.canadalife.co.uk**

Macmillan Cancer Support | Free confidential support to those living with cancer and their loved ones
**www.macmillan.org.uk**

NHS Website Cancer | NHS medical guidance and information on cancer
**www.nhs.uk/conditions/cancer**

Maggie's Cancer Support | Free cancer support and information
**www.maggies.org**

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This guide was produced by Canada Life and RedArc, providers of Canada Life's Personal Nurse Service. RedArc Nurses are experienced, registered nurses who provide practical and emotional support while people go through treatment and recovery.

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