



# SUPPORTING AN EMPLOYEE WITH CANCER

A GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS



MAGGIE'S

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## ABOUT MAGGIE'S

For three decades, Maggie's has been a trailblazer for cancer care, providing free psychological, emotional and practical support for everyone living with cancer, as well as their family and friends.

Our 27 centres across the UK are built in the grounds of major NHS cancer hospitals and support hundreds of thousands of people each year.

No appointment is needed to access our support, and people can simply drop in to any of our centres and speak to fully trained clinical psychologists, benefits advisors, and cancer support specialists.

For more information about Maggie's and the support we offer, visit [maggies.org](https://maggies.org)



## ABOUT THIS GUIDANCE

Maggie's has produced this guidance for employers and managers supporting a colleague or employee who has cancer.

It aims to offer information, tips and advice to help employers feel confident in managing what can be a difficult situation, ensuring that the person with cancer feels supported, practically and emotionally, throughout their illness and beyond.

With cancer affecting almost one in two people at some point in their lifetime, and 560,000 people with cancer currently in the workplace, employers are very likely to have a member of staff with the disease.

This guidance is not intended to replace any company policy or recommendations that are already in place. It is designed to complement existing resources and provide additional information and advice if needed.

This guidance is split into various chapters which focus on the different stages of cancer, from diagnosis to treatment and beyond. You can choose to read the guidance the whole way through or focus on the sections that are most relevant to your situation.



## CANCER IN THE WORKPLACE STATISTICS

It's predicted there will be **1.1 million** working people living with cancer by 2030.

People with cancer are estimated to be **over £900** worse off each month, and **1 in 2** people with cancer consider stopping treatment early because of money worries.

**83%** of people with cancer say unexpected expenses since their cancer diagnosis are impacting their mental health and **78%** of people are struggling to pay bills because of the unexpected costs that come with a cancer diagnosis.

There are **560,000** people with cancer in the workplace and an additional **63,000** people with cancer who want to work but aren't currently.

## WHAT THE LAW SAYS

Cancer is counted as a disability in employment law.

That means not only is it unlawful to discriminate against someone with cancer in terms of redundancy, promotion and career development, but people with cancer also have a right to ask for reasonable adjustments to their role.

As an employer, you don't have to agree to every request, but you must consider them and have a good reason for declining if you do so.

**Some adjustments people with cancer may ask for include:**

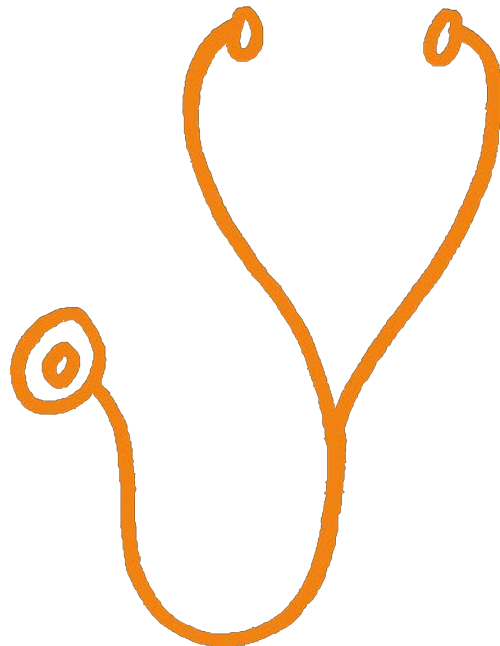
- More flexibility in their hours, such as working shorter days, finishing earlier or later, and taking more frequent breaks.
- Working from home some or all of the time.
- Temporary changes to role responsibilities to reduce pressure or stress.

# DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT

When someone is diagnosed with cancer, they will have to make decision about their job.

The options available to people will vary depending on various factors such as the type or stage of cancer and what kind of treatment is being had, but might include:

- Continuing to work throughout treatment to try and keep things as normal as possible.
- Taking a break from work to focus on treatment and manage the broader emotional and practical implications of cancer.
- Stopping working permanently to focus on other aspects of life.
- Taking early retirement.



This will be a very personal and potentially difficult decision and as an employer, you should make sure colleagues are fully informed and don't feel rushed or pressurised into making a certain choice.

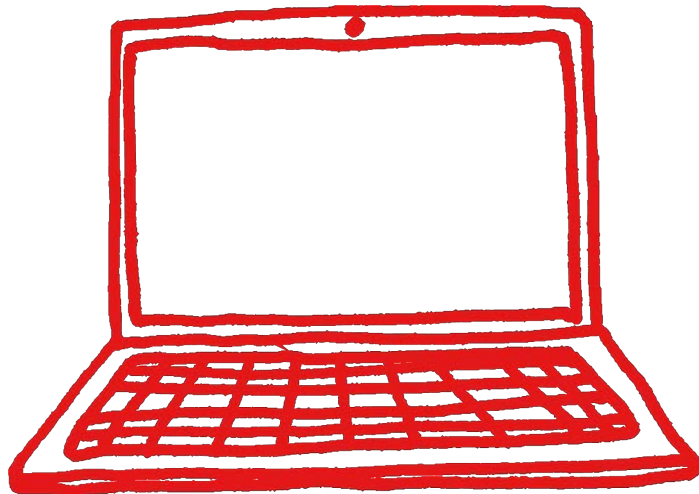
It may be difficult for people to look far ahead and know how much time they will need to take off. Some people may just need a short break to process the shock of a diagnosis, while others may want to stop working for the entire duration of their treatment.

If someone decides to keep working while they receive treatment, there are things you can do to make this more manageable. For example:

- Maintain clear, open communication at every stage, giving employees the opportunity to discuss how they are feeling and what support they need to keep doing their job.
- Where possible, offer staff the option to reduce their hours, work fewer days per week or take more frequent, longer breaks.
- Temporarily make changes to an employee's workload or responsibilities so they are not dealing with large, stressful projects and can focus instead on more straightforward tasks.
- Allow staff to work from home where appropriate or change their working hours to avoid peak travel times.
- Acknowledge that a person's needs and capabilities may vary day to day depending on how they are responding to treatment and experiencing side effects and be flexible in making reasonable adjustments if required.

### Things to bear in mind:

- Sometimes an individual may wish to continue working but change their mind once treatment begins and they find the side effects difficult to manage.
- People with cancer may be restricted from doing certain activities, such as driving, while they are unwell or receiving treatment, which could impact their ability to do their usual job.
- Cancer treatment can impact a person's immune system, meaning they are more likely to catch certain illness and can get sicker than normal if they do. This may require them to avoid commuting or being in places with lots of people, like offices.



## RETURNING TO WORK

Work can play an important role in people's lives, giving them a sense of purpose and normality, so many people with cancer want to return to their jobs when their treatment finishes or when they feel well enough.

However, being diagnosed with cancer and undergoing treatment, which can sometimes last many months or even years, can have a huge emotional and physical toll on a person. Readjusting to life and finding a new normal can be challenging.

### Physical longer term side effects of cancer include:

- Fatigue
- Weaker bones or osteoporosis
- A weakened immune system and greater susceptibility to illnesses
- Cognitive changes, such as memory problems and brain fog
- Sexual and hormonal changes, including early menopause, changes to the menstrual cycle, reduced testosterone and sperm counts, low libido, erectile dysfunction and infertility

### Psychological or emotional side effects could include:

- Anxiety or depression
- Loss of confidence and sense of identity
- Negative body image

- Fear of cancer recurrence and increased health anxiety
- Feelings of shock, disbelief, anger, and frustration
- Feelings of trauma, PTSD, or survivors' guilt

As an employer, there are lots of things you can do to support someone who is returning to work after cancer treatment, and many ways to make the adjustment more manageable.

### **Try to avoid falling into thinking traps and making the following assumptions:**

- The timeframe of physical symptoms is the same as the duration of emotional challenges.
- Positive scan results equate to positive feelings.
- If a person appears well and put together, then they are fine both physically and emotionally.
- Someone expressing their emotions and getting upset or angry means they aren't coping.
- An incurable or terminal diagnosis means work is no longer important to someone.

### **A phased return to work**

A phased return to work enables people to slowly readjust to employment without becoming overwhelmed by doing too much too soon.

This will look different depending on the individual and the role but generally involves an employee working reduced hours or days and gradually increasing over several weeks.

Tips to plan and implement a phased return to work include:

- Make sure you have a clear understanding from your employee about what they feel capable of doing, including working hours, tasks, and responsibilities.
- Be aware that employees may need frequent time off to attend various clinical appointments as part of their follow up care.
- Consider providing the employee with a work buddy, who can make sure they feel welcome.
- Depending how long they have been off, consider arranging inductions or introduction meetings with new members of staff.
- Bear in the mind the impact of physical side effects such as fatigue or chronic pain and consider possible mitigations such as adjustments to workstations or environments.
- Check in with the employee regularly and communicate expectations clearly, monitoring their progress and discussing additional support or adjustments if needed.

### **Setting expectations**

It may help to take a rehabilitative approach to an employee's return to work. This would involve acknowledging, and communicating, that a member of staff would not be expected to be performing at their pre-cancer level from the moment they return.

Many employees feel anxious about their performance when they return to work and will likely compare themselves to how

well they performed before they stopped working. Initially, it is unlikely they will be performing to the same level, due to factors such as energy levels, ability to concentrate, and emotional resilience.

If employees view themselves as underperforming, this could trigger feelings of embarrassment, anxiety and low confidence. It is important that employers are clear about expectations and ensure they are fair, flexible, and reflective of an individual's personal experience.

Returning to full performance will be a gradual process but is an opportunity to build – or rebuild – someone's confidence and self-esteem.

**Try to avoid falling into the following behavioural traps:**

- Not having difficult or challenging conversations for fear or upsetting someone.
- Being overly protective and micro-managing an employee.
- Leaving in someone 'in peace' and not giving them enough attention.
- Over- or under-planning.
- Providing unsolicited advice or reassurance.
- Sharing information with other colleagues without consent.





# EMPATHETIC COMMUNICATION

Empathetic communication shows you are listening and understanding what the other person is saying.

When working with or supporting someone with cancer, it is likely you will face some difficult conversations. This could be if a colleague has received a poor prognosis, is worried about telling their children or family about their illness, is concerned about the financial implications of having cancer, or has been recently bereaved.

Think about vocal cues – pitch, volume, rate, silence – and non-verbal cues, such as body language, facial expressions, eye contact, respect of personal space, and touch. These all impact how someone feels during a conversation and whether they feel safe, supported and understood.

## **Communication traps and things to avoid saying include:**

- You look so well!
- Be positive, move forward and put it all behind you.
- You will beat this; you've got to keep fighting.
- You're going to see the world differently now; there's always a silver lining.
- When do you get the scan results, what did your oncologist say?
- Have you tried...

Remember that your role is not always to fix a problem or provide a solution. You can still help simply by listening and

encouraging someone to express their thoughts and feelings. Stick to open questions and use affirmations and reflections to guide the conversation.

# BENEFITS TO EMPLOYERS

Ensuring employees have the appropriate support throughout their cancer treatment not only offer significant benefits to the individual with cancer, but also for employers.

For example, retaining staff members:

- Saves on time, costs and resources that would be required for the recruitment and onboarding of new staff members.
- Encourages better workplace engagement in the long run, with the staff member given adequate support to perform at their best.
- Cultivates a supportive workplace environment with knock-on benefits to staff loyalty and retention.

## SUPPORTING CARERS

It may be that a member of staff has not been diagnosed with cancer themselves but is supporting a friend or relative who has. Having a supportive employer can make this experience a lot easier.

Often, carers will want to attend appointments with their loved one or take time off to care for their friend or relative if they are particularly unwell or have received difficult news. This may be unplanned or requested at short notice.

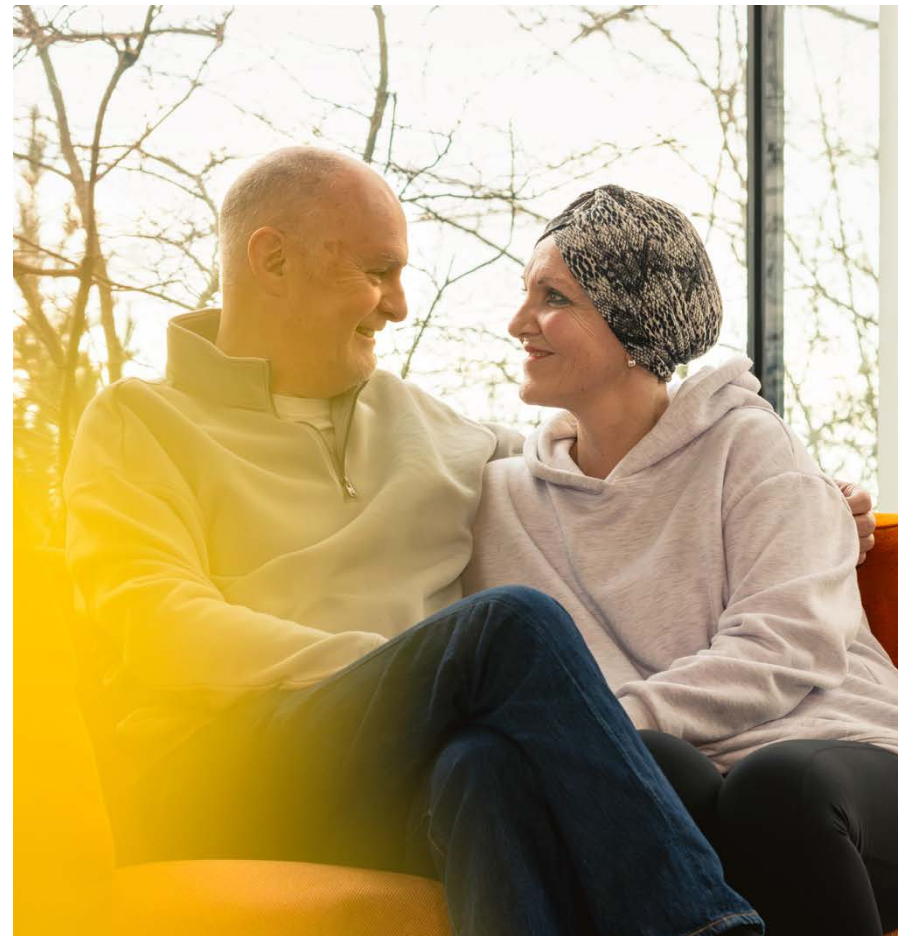
Where possible, employers should be flexible in allowing staff to take appropriate time off if needed. This could be offered as compassionate or dependents' leave, or employees could be given the option to work different hours or make up time another day.

Similarly to managing an employee with cancer, support for a carer should be tailored to the individual and employers should be guided by their needs and specific situation. Some people may need extensive emotional support and want to talk openly and often about what they are going through. Others may see work as a place they go to escape the challenges of caring for someone with cancer and feel a sense of normality.

Maintaining clear communication and having regular conversations with your employee is crucial. You should always be clear about your expectations as an employer but

take into consideration the needs and requirements of the staff member, which will likely change over time.

Remember that well supported employees often maintain higher levels of performance and are more likely to remain in work if they are offered the flexibility and compassion needed during a challenging period.



## EMPLOYER'S CHECKLIST

- Read your organisation's policies on sick pay, long term absence, and occupational health
- Have an open conversation with your employee about their current needs and requirements
- Ensure the person with cancer is in contact with a designated staff member from HR or occupational health
- Clearly put into writing any reasonable adjustments that are agreed, such as changes to working hours or shift patterns
- Ask the person with cancer if they are happy for others in the organisation to know what is going on
- Schedule regular check in meetings with the person with cancer to review their physical health and mental wellbeing and make further adjustments if needed
- Signpost your employee to organisations and charities that could offer them additional support
- Contact your organisation's employee relations team or similar, who can provide advice and guidance to help you best support the person with cancer

## FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR CANCER PATIENTS

People with cancer may be entitled to financial support from the government if cancer and its treatment is affecting their health or they are on a low or temporarily reduced income.

People will be entitled to various benefits depending on their individual circumstances, but the main allowances are:

- **Statutory Sick Pay (SSP)**

If someone is unable to work, they can claim Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) from their employer. The amount they receive can vary based on length of service and an employee's usual working pattern (i.e. full time or part time). They need a Fitness for Work Certificate from their GP to support the claim. Employees cannot work while claiming SSP and the benefit can be claimed for up to 28 weeks. Some employers pay occupational sick pay on top of SSP.

- **Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)**

ESA is an alternative benefit for people who don't qualify for SSP or whose SSP has ended. People who are unemployed or self-employed can claim ESA. ESA is not means-tested so it's not affected by your savings or other household members' income. Certain incomes such as personal pensions are taken into account. Claimants must have paid, or been credited with, National Insurance contributions within the last three years.

- **Personal Independence Payment (PIP) in England and Wales**

PIP is an extra benefit for people under pension age who have difficulties with daily living activities and getting around. It can be claimed on top of any other income or benefits. Claims are regularly reviewed by a Health Assessment Advisory Service (funded by the DWP). People need to undergo an assessment to determine whether or not they are eligible for PIP.

- **Adult Disability Payment (ADP) in Scotland**

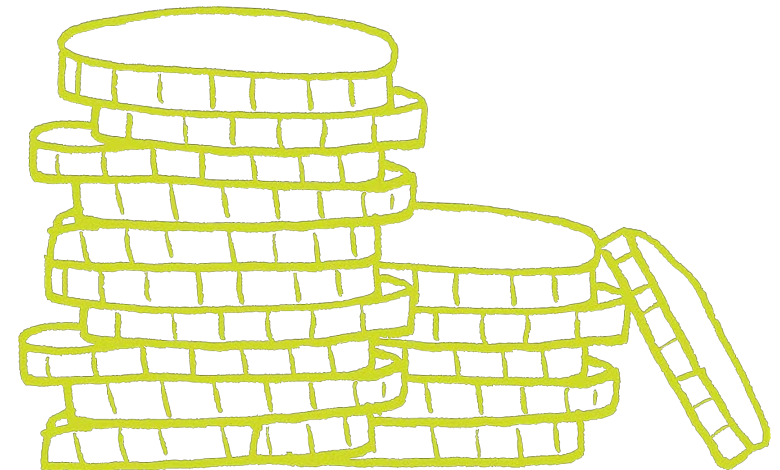
ADP is an extra benefit for people who have difficulties with daily living activities and getting around. It can be claimed on top of any other income or benefits. Claims are made through Social Security Scotland and are regularly reviewed.

- **Universal Credit (UC)**

A means-tested benefit which can be claimed by people under pension age, UC combines help with living costs and housing costs whether or not someone is working. The amount automatically adjusts each month according to earnings and other income. You cannot claim UC if you have savings over £16,000. If you live with a partner, their income and savings are also taken into account when calculating UC.

There may be other payments that people with a cancer diagnosis, and their families, may be entitled to, based on their individual circumstances. These include:

- Carers allowance (England and Wales)
- Carer support payments (Scotland)
- Council tax reduction
- Housing benefit
- Child Disability Living Allowance (England and Wales)
- Child Disability Payment (Scotland)





## HOW MAGGIE'S CAN HELP

Maggie's offers workshops for employers which provide information and advice on how best to support their employees with knowledge, empathy and understanding.

There is lots of information on our website about the topic of work and cancer. Although it is predominantly aimed at cancer patients, it may be helpful for employers to familiarise themselves with some of the issues people with cancer may face, as well as their rights.

Some useful web pages include:

- [Work and cancer | Maggie's](#)
- [Talking to employers and colleagues | Maggie's](#)
- [Benefits and work | Maggie's](#)
- [Self-employed with cancer | Maggie's](#)

Staff working at Maggie's centres across the UK can provide practical and emotional support for people with cancer, as well as their friends and family.

Each centre also has benefits advisors available for cancer patients to talk to if they are looking for advice on how to manage financially.

Visit <https://www.maggies.org/our-centres/> to find your nearest Maggie's. You don't need an appointment, just come in.



Everyone's home of cancer care

[maggies.org](https://maggies.org)

Maggie Keswick Jencks Cancer Caring Centres Trust (Maggie's)  
is a registered charity, no. SC024414

