



CANCER AT WORK

**Tips for employees
diagnosed with cancer**

Communicating your diagnosis



Being diagnosed with cancer can be extremely overwhelming. Making plans for how to proceed and taking time to prepare what you will say and how you will deliver the news to your employer and/or co-workers may help ease a difficult announcement. **Prepare yourself for a wide range of responses and emotions.**

Should I tell my employer and/or colleagues about my diagnosis?

To help you prepare, have a chat with your medical team to obtain all the necessary information about your health status, what to expect and how your treatment might affect your ability to work. **Remember that things might change during and after treatment.**

You are not obliged to communicate and share all the details of your diagnosis and treatment with your employer, unless you want to. Nonetheless, **maintaining honest, two-way communication with your employer can help them understand what support you may need.** This may include making reasonable adjustments and changes to your work to make things easier for you.

Who should I inform at work and how?

Telling your employer about your cancer straightaway is entirely personal. A cancer diagnosis is difficult to discuss, and it is understandable if you are uncomfortable or feel nervous about disclosing your health status to your employer and/or colleagues. On the other hand, **you might appreciate the support that your manager/supervisor and co-workers can offer.**

Below are some questions that may help you prepare to communicate your diagnosis:



- What is the nature of my relationship with my employer and colleagues?
- Who is the key person that will be responsible to make the adjustments and modifications that I may need at work because of my health condition?
- Are there any other people at work, besides the key person, that may provide me with emotional and practical support?
- What would be the best approach for me to feel more comfortable communicating my diagnosis to my employer? (e.g. a face-to-face meeting, a telephone conversation, a teleconference, an email, or a text message, etc)
- Would I prefer to be alone for this conversation or would it be helpful to take a trusted person with me? If so, who would I want by my side?
- What questions might I be asked and how could I respond?
- How can I keep an open line of communication with my employer and/or my co-workers particularly during (potentially) long periods of absence?

What and how much information should I share and ask about?

What and how much you tell your employer about your diagnosis will depend on several factors, including the kind of relationship you have with your employer and the kind of effects that your treatment may pose to your own health and safety and that of your co-workers. Remember that sharing your diagnosis with your employer does not mean that your colleagues need to know. **Your supervisor, manager or employer is not allowed to use and disclose your medical information with others unless you give express consent.**

If you decide to share the news, you may consider sharing information about:



- the symptoms you are experiencing
- your diagnosis
- your treatment type(s), potential side effects, and how these may impact your physical health, emotional well-being, and specifically, your attendance, productivity, and work performance
- any time off work you may need and when you are likely to return to work given the information you have at hand

You may consider asking about:



- work adjustments, extra breaks (because of pain or fatigue, or to attend medical appointments), reduced hours, working from home, part-time work, changes to the workplace (e.g. suitable chair, height-adjustable desk, or ergonomic work tools) or any other needs you can anticipate
- the support you might require to carry out your duties and assigned tasks
- the benefits you can access and the employees' rights and company's policies regarding sick pay, absence from work, occupational health, assistance programmes, etc.

It may be helpful to write down what you want to say before you share your diagnosis for the first time to your employer. You may also want to write down any questions and concerns beforehand, **as well as any agreed changes to your working arrangements after you have talked with your employer.**

Working during treatment



Whether you are able to work during treatment will depend on several factors, including your medical team's recommendations, the type and stage of cancer, the type of treatment you will be undergoing and its side effects, your overall health and preferences, the kind of work you do, and company policies regarding sick pay, absence from work, and occupational health.

How can I tell my employer that I can continue working during treatment, if advised by my doctor?

Before approaching your employer, **you need to ask your medical team how the disease and its treatment will affect your work performance, how unwell you may be, and whether you will be able to continue working during treatment.**

If the doctor advises you that you can keep working during treatment and you decide to continue to work, you may discuss with your employer and/or the Human Resources department (if any) suitable options to help you balance work and treatment.

Prepare yourself for the conversation:

- What should my manager/supervisor know about my health condition and how my treatment might affect my work performance?
- I inform my manager/supervisor that my physical and psychological conditions may change day by day and for a long period of time.
- If I need support while working during treatment, I take the first step and reach out to my manager/supervisor, even if it is not easy for me.



Below is a checklist that may help you preparing for working through cancer:

- I keep track of my treatment schedule and record any side effects I experience, as this information may be helpful in planning my work commitments around my health needs.
- I explore all the options, such as work adjustments, reduced hours, the option to work from home, or any other reasonable accommodations that may enable me to effectively work during treatment with ease.
- If possible, I schedule my treatments in a way that allows me some recovery time. I may do this by scheduling treatments such as chemotherapy late in the day, at the end of the week, or prior to a day that I am able to work from home.
- I prepare myself for the eventuality that I will experience radical physical and psychological changes throughout the course of my treatment. Keeping an open line of communication with my employer and colleagues during this time may ensure optimal support.
- I set and maintain boundaries when I feel that I cannot physically or mentally fulfil what is being asked of me. I take care of myself and, even if it is not easy, ask for the support that I need. I share my issues with my manager/supervisor who may identify a colleague to delegate my tasks to.
- I ask my manager to schedule regular meetings to discuss how I am coping, how to manage any challenges, and other changes and adjustments s/he can make to help me.



Return to work after treatment

Once you feel ready to return to work after your treatment is finished, **inform yourself about any relevant occupational guidelines and policies that can help you get ready to fully return to your work life.**



Your team, supervisors and managers might respond to your return to work in a reserved manner. **Communicate proactively with your managers, supervisors, and colleagues about your needs to facilitate a successful reintegration process.**

Below is a checklist that may help you preparing to return to work after treatment:



- I discuss my plan to get back to work as early as possible with my employer and I inform my manager/supervisor about my health status and any late side effects I am still experiencing (e.g. fatigue, soreness, difficulty with concentrating without breaks, limited movement possibility, etc.).
- If I feel uncertain about my ability to fully return to work, I discuss with my manager/supervisor possible options and temporary adjustments (e.g. lighter/different duties, changes to the workplace, gradual return to work, adjustments in my job description, part-time, etc.).
- I voice my concerns and clarify what works well and what should be adapted at work during regular meetings with my manager/supervisor.
- I take the time to look after myself to minimise stress and better cope with my return to work (e.g. keeping a healthy diet, doing regular physical activity, relaxing after work, etc.).

“My colleagues covered for me and my work was redistributed while I was on sick leave. No replacement was needed. I had regular contact with the team throughout the treatment.” Technical engineer in an agri-food industry diagnosed with breast cancer

Want to learn more?

The **'How to manage cancer at work'** Handbook by the ECL Patient Support Working Group includes key information you should have on hand.

You can also contact your national or regional cancer leagues and patient organisations. A non-comprehensive list of cancer leagues is available on **ECL's website**.

About this leaflet

This leaflet was developed by the **ECL Patient Support Working Group (PSWG)**, an independent network composed of cancer care experts from across Europe who are working together to develop best practice guides and informational materials to raise awareness of a wide range of quality of life and survivorship issues, as well as to improve the quality of cancer care in Europe. For more information, please contact: **ECL@europeancancerleagues.org**.

The leaflet was reviewed and endorsed by the following organisations:

