



# CANCER AT WORK

**Tips for employers  
supporting employees  
with cancer**

## Every cancer is unique

Cancer is a large group of diseases that can start in almost any organ or tissue of the body when abnormal cells grow uncontrollably, go beyond their usual boundaries to invade adjoining parts of the body and/or spread to other organs<sup>1</sup>. **Each person reacts and copes differently when they learn they have cancer.**

## What businesses and organisations need to know

Around 1.6 million people of working age are diagnosed with cancer in Europe each year and cancer treatments are often accompanied by long periods of sickness absence<sup>2</sup>. **A growing number of employees continue to work while being treated for cancer or return to work shortly after their cancer treatment is completed.** Cancer exerts tremendous physical, emotional, and financial strain on individuals who will not only be worried about their health but also their jobs. **Cancer and its treatments leave behind physical and emotional scars of many kinds.** For instance, people affected by cancer often report fatigue and cognitive impairments and may not be sufficiently energised for a long time.

## Employers, human resources professionals, managers and supervisors play a key role

**As an employer, a manager or a supervisor, you face a balancing act between responsibility and compassion.** By maintaining careful, close and appropriate contact with your employees, you can have a decisive influence on the working environment and their reintegration process. Consult your Human Resources department (if any) or seek more information from external experts, such as cancer societies, patient organisations or social workers, who are best placed to advise you during this challenging time.

You have legal responsibilities to ensure a safe and healthy workplace. **Make sure you follow your organisation's policies and understand your legal obligations in order to comply with your country's employment laws.**

# 1. When one of my employees gets diagnosed with cancer



## Tips

- Show empathy and care when an employee shares his/her cancer diagnosis. Focus on the employee's needs rather than the needs of the workplace. Be practical by offering to help in specific ways – try to avoid being vague.
- In line with your employee's preferences concerning communication channels and frequency, include them by keeping him/her up to date with what is happening at work and checking on him/her.
- Make the necessary arrangements to temporarily cover the employee's tasks should he/she require time off from work.
- In agreement with the employee, inform his/her team and colleagues about the situation, communicating only information the employee wishes to share.
- Be aware and understand your organisation's legal obligations when it comes to sick leave and labour protection of an employee with a disability or chronic disease (including cancer).

**"I am afraid that I could lose my job if I tell my employer about my illness. I also feel responsible for an increased workload on my colleagues. I want stability and support, and I need someone to listen to me."** Cancer patient

<sup>1</sup>World Health Organization (2021). Cancer. Retrieved from: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/cancer>

<sup>2</sup>European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2017). Rehabilitation and Return to Work after Cancer. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union Retrieved from: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/rehabilitation-and-return-work-after-cancer-literature-review>

## 2. Managing your employee's absence during treatment



### Checklist

- I actively listen as my employee shares his/her concerns and I acknowledge his/her needs and feelings.
- I ask my employee if he/she wants to be kept up-to-date with what is happening at work.
- I redistribute his/her tasks internally in agreement with other colleagues and, if needed, I come up with a more sustainable, longer-term solution.
- After some time, I will discuss with my employee his/her needs and possible options for his/her return to work.
- If my employee can continue to work during treatment and is advised to do so by his/her medical team, I will be ready to put reasonable adjustments in place and comply with my country's employment law.

**“During my absence, I would like to still feel a part of the team and considered an employee. I would really appreciate it if colleagues asked about my health. The idea that I can return to work helps me to keep my professional identity and my social contacts.”**  
Administrative assistant in a multinational company

## 3. Preparing for your employee's return to work after treatment



### Checklist

- I inform myself about the common side effects my employee might experience during his/her illness and after treatment.
- I schedule regular meetings with my employee to discuss and understand his/her personal situation and needs.
- I make reasonable adjustments and modifications to my employee's workload. He/she should be allowed to re-start working at his/her own pace while I ensure key tasks are covered.
- In agreement with the employee, I inform my staff about his/her return to work and explain which decisions have been made to ease his/her reintegration at work.

**“When I return to work after treatment, I would like to see that my company has prepared for having me back at the office at my own pace. I am looking forward to a welcoming conversation on the first day. I hope my colleagues will understand that certain symptoms, such as fatigue or anxiety can persist for a long time after treatment.”** Commercial manager affected by 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](mailto:ECL@europeancancerleagues.org)**.

The leaflet was reviewed and endorsed by the following organisations:

