

If your employee or colleague has blood cancer

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**Blood
cancer
UK**

How we can help

We're a community dedicated to beating blood cancer by funding research and supporting those affected. We offer free and confidential support by phone or email, free information about blood cancer, and an online forum where you can talk to others affected by blood cancer.



bloodcancer.org.uk
forum.bloodcancer.org.uk



0808 2080 888
(Mon, Tue, Thu, Fri: 10am–4pm, Wed: 10am–1pm)



support@bloodcancer.org.uk

If your employee or colleague has blood cancer

Supporting an employee with blood cancer can feel overwhelming. You may have never heard of blood cancer. There are lots of different types and some are quite rare. You might feel shocked and it can be tricky to find the right words.

Having an open conversation with your employee or colleague to let them know you want to support them is a good way to start. Having a supportive manager and team can really help.

Anyone affected by cancer, now or in the past, is protected by the law and has certain rights. Helping them make 'reasonable adjustments' to their role may mean they can keep working through cancer.

Key facts about blood cancer

It's best to find out about your employee's individual situation, as blood cancer and its treatment can be so varied. But here are some key facts to get you started.

Blood cancer happens when something goes wrong with the development of blood cells. This can stop the blood working normally to fight off infections or repair the body. There are several types of blood cancer, including:

- leukaemia
- lymphoma
- myeloma
- MDS (myelodysplastic syndromes)
- MPN (myeloproliferative neoplasms).

Within these groups are many different blood cancers. Each type has different symptoms, treatments and outlook. Blood cancer can be fast-growing (acute) or slow-growing (chronic).

Coronavirus and blood cancer

Blood cancer affects the immune system, and so do treatments for blood cancer. This means people with blood cancer can be prone to more serious infections.

We know that when people with blood cancer get coronavirus, they have a higher chance of getting seriously ill and of dying. That's why many people with blood cancer are classed as 'clinically extremely vulnerable' and were advised by the NHS and the government to shield during the first part of the pandemic.

Covid vaccines and blood cancer

The vaccination programme has made huge strides in protecting people from coronavirus, but the vaccines don't work as well for people with damaged immune systems.

So unfortunately, for most people with blood cancer, having two or more vaccinations doesn't protect them from getting seriously ill.

This means that people with blood cancer are still being advised to take extra precautions.

Your employee's rights

Cancer is classed as a disability in UK law. This means it's illegal for employers to discriminate against people with cancer because of their health. Your employee is protected under the Equality Act (England, Scotland and Wales) and the Disability Discrimination Act (Northern Ireland). This also covers some parts of the recruitment process.

People with blood cancer are protected even if they have a chronic blood cancer, they aren't having treatment at the moment, or they've had blood cancer in the past.

Employers have a duty to keep their employees safe at work. For people with blood cancer at increased risk of infection, this may require some extra adjustments, such as working from home or making adjustments to their role.

Reasonable adjustments

Employers have a duty to make 'reasonable adjustments'. This means trying to support people with blood cancer at work, and making changes so they can still do their job. This means different things depending on the situation, but could include:

- **Adjusting their hours or duties.** This could mean working from home, starting work later or changing some duties based on their energy levels or risk of infection.
- **Time off for hospital appointments.** People having treatment may need more time off initially, and this may change over time. People with a chronic blood cancer may need regular check-ups even if they're not having treatment.
- **A 'phased return' to work.** This could involve coming back part-time or with flexible hours. People with blood cancer say they worry about returning to work after time off. They need support and good communication to ease their return.
- **Changing their equipment.** For example, providing voice recognition software if they're having trouble with typing.

Your employee's medical team may also be able to provide a 'fit note' advising on what changes would help.

Start by having a meeting with your employee, your HR department, and your occupational health advisor if you have one. It may help your employee if someone they're close to can join the meeting, to help them feel more comfortable.

Supporting your employee during coronavirus

Working from home - even if they don't normally

You may be able to make some 'reasonable adjustments' for your employee, such as changes to their role or providing equipment, to help them stay at home and continue working.

Adjusting hours or duties

If your employee can't work from home full-time, there may be some duties they could perform from home, to reduce how much they need to come in.

You may be able to make changes to their duties at work, to reduce the amount of contact they have with other people.

Adjusting their hours might help them to travel to work at quieter times, or be at work during quieter periods of the day.

Sick pay

Your employee may be eligible for company or statutory sick pay if their GP or specialist believes they are not well enough to work.

Check the conditions of your company's sick pay policy carefully if your employee produces a fit note, so you make sure you are complying with it and the law.

More about blood cancer

Blood cancer treatment

Some people have treatment that aims to cure the cancer (get them into remission) – this means there is no sign of any cancer left.

Some blood cancers are chronic and cannot be cured, but can be managed with ongoing treatment. The treatment aims to keep the cancer under control or achieve a remission for a period of time.

Some people with chronic blood cancers don't need treatment straight away. They may be on a treatment approach called 'watch and wait'. They'll have regular blood tests and appointments, and will only start treatment if and when it's needed. However, they may still be living with the symptoms of their blood cancer.

Treatments you may hear about include chemotherapy, stem cell transplant, radiotherapy, targeted therapies, immunotherapy or monoclonal antibodies.

Some people will need to have treatment for the rest of their life, meaning they are living with blood cancer as a chronic, long-term condition. Other people will go into remission, but may be dealing with the after effects of treatment and follow-up appointments.

Your employee may need to stay in hospital for their treatment, or they may have it as an outpatient.

Symptoms and side effects

If your employee or colleague has continued to work or they're back at work after treatment, they may be living with the symptoms of blood cancer or side effects of treatment. Some of these symptoms and side effects may last a short time and eventually stop. Others may last a long time or even start a while after their treatment has finished.

Finding out about the impact of their cancer and treatment on their daily life will help you support them at work. There are many possible symptoms and side effects, but here are some of the more common ones:

- increased risk of infections
- severe tiredness (fatigue)
- memory and concentration problems
- emotional problems including depression and anxiety
- damage to nerves in the hands, feet and arms
- changes to appearance, like hair loss, rashes, skin changes, or weight loss or gain.

There are many more, so it's important to find out from your employee how the cancer or its treatment is affecting them.

Other things that might help

It helps to keep channels of communication open and have regular catch-ups to see how your employee is doing, and if they need further support or changes at work.

Blood cancer and its treatment can have long-term effects. The impact on work could vary or change. For example, some people may be more prone to colds and other illnesses because of the effect of treatment on their immune system.

You may need to change the way sickness absence is managed to take this into account. People with blood cancer worry about money when they are diagnosed. Letting them know about the company's sick pay policy, and statutory sick pay, may help.

Some people find that living with blood cancer knocks their confidence, and they may need a boost. Encourage them to look after their well-being and get support if they need it. This should help with work-life balance, confidence and work performance.

You can also let them know about any employment assistance programmes or counselling services available through work.

People with blood cancer say that explaining things to colleagues and coping with other people's reactions can be hard. For example, if colleagues stare at them because they've lost their hair, or comment on their tiredness. You could help them work out a communication plan, for example:

- Which colleagues, if any, do they want to know about their diagnosis?
- How do they want to communicate this? Via email or face to face?
- Is there any information you could pass on?

It could help to show other staff members this information (with your employee's permission).

For practical tips about rights, making adjustments and boosting their confidence at work, direct your employee or colleague to: **[bloodcancer.org.uk/living-well](https://www.bloodcancer.org.uk/living-well)**

Support for you

Supporting someone who has been diagnosed with blood cancer can be hard. Contact our Support Services Team free on **0808 2080 888** or **support@bloodcancer.org.uk** for more support, more information about your employee's particular type of blood cancer and other ways you may be able to help them at work.

There is more information on our website about coronavirus, blood cancer and employment. Visit **bloodcancer.org.uk**

For expert advice about employment rights, coronavirus, and supporting vulnerable employees, contact ACAS (**acas.org.uk**)

Macmillan Cancer Support provides further training and information for employers. Go to **macmillan.org.uk** (search for 'Macmillan at work')

An Access to Work grant could help pay for practical support so your employee can stay in work. Find out more at: **gov.uk/access-to-work**

About this fact sheet

This fact sheet was updated by Blood Cancer UK in July 2021 to include up-to-date information about the coronavirus pandemic.

We produced the original version in November 2019 in collaboration with expert medical professionals and people affected by blood cancer. Thank you to Clinical Nurse Specialists Alison Paterson, Darren Simpson, Jodie Nightingill and Reta Sowton, Clinical Lead Therapist Claire O’Herlihy, Advanced Nurse Practitioner Kirsty Crozier, Lead Oncology Physiotherapist Louise Malone and employment law specialist Rose Sunter for their support checking the content of the fact sheet.

Our fact sheets contain general information. Always listen to the advice of your specialist about your individual condition because every person is different.

A list of references used in this fact sheet is available on request. Please email information@bloodcancer.org.uk

Disclaimer

We make every effort to make sure that the information in this fact sheet is accurate, but you shouldn’t rely on it instead of a fully trained clinician. It’s important to always listen to your specialist and seek advice if you have any concerns or questions about your health. Blood Cancer UK can’t accept any loss or damage resulting from any inaccuracy in this information, or from external information that we link to.

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Because we face it together

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