

If your employee or colleague has blood cancer

This fact sheet includes key facts about blood cancer and suggests ways that you can support an employee or colleague who is affected by it.



**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

Supporting your employee or colleague

Supporting an employee or colleague 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 and letting them know you want to support them is a good place to start. Having a supportive manager and co-workers 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 if they want to. There are other supportive things you can do to

make their life easier at work, and ways for you to get further information and support yourself.

What is 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, such as:

- 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).

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.

For more information on 'watch and wait', download our fact sheet **Watch and wait: a quick guide for employers** from: **[bloodcancer.org.uk/information](https://www.bloodcancer.org.uk/information)**

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 possible side effects, so it's important to find out from your employee how the cancer or its treatment is affecting them.

Your employee's rights

It's illegal for employers to discriminate against people with cancer because of their medical situation. 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.

They're protected even if:

- they have a chronic or progressive blood cancer
- they aren't having treatment at the moment (for example, if they're on 'watch and wait')
- they've had blood cancer in the past.

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 if they want to. This means different things depending on the situation. Below are some examples.

Start by having a meeting with your employee, HR department and occupational health advisor, if you have one, to find out what may help and agree a plan. If your employee's medical team can be involved then even better – they may be able to provide a 'fit note' advising on what changes may help. It may help your employee if someone they're close to can join the meeting, to help them feel more comfortable.

Everyone with blood cancer is different, but some examples of reasonable adjustments that might help include:

- **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 channels of communication to ease their return.
- **Adjusting their hours or duties.** This could mean working from home, starting work later or changing some duties based on their energy levels.

- **Changing their equipment.** For example, providing voice recognition software if they're having trouble with typing.

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.

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)**

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).

More information and support

Macmillan Cancer Support and ACAS provide further training and information for employers. Go to **macmillan.org.uk** (search for 'Macmillan at work') or **acas.org.uk** (search for 'cancer at work').

The government's Fit for Work service offers impartial advice. Visit **fitforwork.org**

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**

Emotional support

Supporting someone who has been diagnosed with blood cancer can be hard. Contact our Support Services Team free on **0808 2080 888** or **support@bloodwise.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.

About this fact sheet

We have produced this fact sheet 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 this 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.

The information in this fact sheet is correct at the time it was published (November 2019).

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Because we face it together

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Get in touch for:

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- information about blood cancer and life after diagnosis
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Your feedback on this fact sheet can help us improve – please send any comments to **information@bloodcancer.org.uk**

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