

Watch and wait explained: for employers

This fact sheet explains ‘watch and wait’ for people with blood cancer and suggests ways that line managers, HR teams and occupational health professionals can support employees who are 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

What is watch and wait?

While many types of cancer need to be treated immediately, not everyone with blood cancer (such as leukaemia or lymphoma) needs treatment straight away.

'Watch and wait' is a way of monitoring these people with regular check-ups and blood tests until they need treatment. It's only recommended for people with slow-developing (chronic) blood cancers, with few or no symptoms.

Around 27,000 people are currently monitored in this way in the UK – that's 13% of everyone living with blood cancer. Research shows that people on watch and wait aren't

Our website has more information about watch and wait, which may be helpful for both employers and employees. Go to **[bloodcancer.org.uk/watch-and-wait](https://www.bloodcancer.org.uk/watch-and-wait)**

any more at risk of their condition worsening than people receiving active treatment, like chemotherapy.

Most people on watch and wait continue to work during this monitoring period and as they start treatment. There are a number of things you can keep in mind to help support these employees in the workplace.

How can watch and wait affect people?

Emotional and psychological impact

Learning that you have a form of blood cancer is an extremely personal thing to go through. It's not unusual for people who have been diagnosed with blood cancer to experience levels of stress, anxiety and depression that have a negative impact on their quality of life.

For people on watch and wait, who aren't receiving treatment, continuing life 'as normal' can be a daily struggle, with many experiencing high levels of anxiety between their check-ups.

Physical effects

A large number of people will also experience extreme tiredness (fatigue). Some people on watch and wait may need to reduce or change their working hours, or take periods of absence, to cope with this.

Many people on watch and wait will also have weakened immune systems as a result of blood cancer. This may mean that they take longer to recover from illnesses than you might expect of someone with a healthy immune system – though everyone will be different.

How to support your employee

Every person with blood cancer is different, so it's important not to make assumptions about their circumstances, capabilities or adjustments you may need to make in the workplace. Where possible, these decisions should be made in partnership with your employee – and, where relevant, on the advice of their specialist doctor (consultant).

Talking about blood cancer

If one of your employees is placed on watch and wait for a blood cancer, simple adjustments can make a big difference to helping them stay in work while remaining comfortable and achieving their best.

You may both benefit from having an open discussion about any adjustments that need to be made to help your employee continue to deliver a high quality of work.

Creating an ongoing dialogue with your employee will help you respond to their needs, as these might change. However, you should judge the right level of communication for each individual, as everyone is different.

Here are some things that might help you to have these conversations with your employee:

- Choose somewhere where you won't be interrupted to have this conversation.
- Reassure your employee that anything they share will be kept confidential.

- Let them set the pace.
- Offer verbal cues or ask gentle questions to show you are listening.
- Keep the conversation about them and not you, as no two experiences will be the same.
- Give them plenty of time to compose themselves if they become upset and be prepared to postpone if they become too distressed to continue.

We have more information and support for people who continue to work following a blood cancer diagnosis, which you may wish to share with your employee. Visit **[bloodcancer.org.uk/living-well](https://www.bloodcancer.org.uk/living-well)**

Your employee's rights

In England, Scotland and Wales, people with cancer are protected from discrimination at work under the Equality Act 2010. For the purposes of the Act, anyone with cancer is considered to meet the definition of disability from the day they are diagnosed. This is true even if they appear well and are not receiving treatment.

You should therefore make reasonable adjustments to make sure any workers with blood cancer (including contract workers, trainees, apprentices and business partners) aren't seriously disadvantaged when doing their jobs.

In addition, you must not treat any employee less favourably because of a cancer diagnosis under any circumstances, or treat them less favourably because of a reason arising from their cancer diagnosis (such as the need to work reduced hours) unless such treatment is justified.

It's possible that you may see a change in your employee's performance or conduct after diagnosis or during any monitoring period. If so, be sure to give your employee the opportunity to talk through possible reasons for the change before considering any further action (including disciplinary or punitive action). Employees are protected under the Equality Act for situations where their employer knew, or should have known, about their cancer diagnosis.

Employees in Northern Ireland are protected by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Disability Discrimination Order 2006.

You can find more information about your legal obligations as an employer at [gov.uk/reasonable-adjustments-for-disabled-workers](https://www.gov.uk/reasonable-adjustments-for-disabled-workers)

Making reasonable adjustments

Most working people on watch and wait will need time off work to go for blood tests and to attend hospital or GP appointments, so doctors can monitor their condition. The length of time between these appointments will depend on each patient's individual circumstances, but most people will see their doctor once every few months.

Ideally, employees should not be required to take annual leave for appointments relating to their condition, but you should discuss all the options in accordance with your absence management policy.

Other small adjustments to help your employee manage their fatigue, and other symptoms or side effects, could include:

- adjustments to their working environment
- reduced working hours, flexible working or job-sharing
- more breaks
- specialist equipment
- limiting anything that’s physically demanding
- gradual return to work following absence due to sickness
- adjusting their performance targets
- redistributing their workload.

Follow-up

While some people on watch and wait will eventually need treatment if their condition gets worse, others may never need it. It’s therefore important to make sure that any arrangements for your employees remain appropriate if things change.

You may want to schedule quarterly review sessions, or more informal chats following your employee’s check-ups. Speak to your employee to see what works for them.

Supporting carers

You may have an employee who is supporting or caring for someone on watch and wait.

Carers are entitled to a reasonable amount of time off work (paid or unpaid) to deal with emergencies involving someone who is dependent on them (such as their spouse, partner, child, grandparent or parent), under the Employments Rights Act 1996. In the context of watch and wait, this might include taking a spouse, partner or close family member to the GP surgery or hospital due to an infection or rapid decline in health, for example.

Anyone who has worked for you for 26 weeks or more is also entitled to request flexible working to help them care for their loved one. Flexible working can include different working hours or days, or working from home for some or all of that time.

If an employee applies for flexible working, you're obliged to respond in a 'reasonable manner'. This includes:

- assessing the advantages and disadvantages of their application
- organising a meeting to discuss their application
- providing an appeals process if you don't meet their request.

You can also start flexible working for a trial period, which gives both you and your employee the option of returning to the original contract.

Alternatively, you can suggest another possible solution if you do not accept their original flexible working request.

Telling colleagues

Your employee may choose to tell other members of staff about their diagnosis, or they may prefer to keep it confidential. This is their choice to make, but there are things you can do to support your employee in making their decision.

For example, if they would like others to know about their condition, it's important to discuss how they would like to share the news. Some individuals may choose to tell colleagues themselves, while others may prefer for another colleague to share the news on their behalf.

If the latter, it's important to understand exactly what information your employee would like to be shared, how they would like it communicated and with whom. You should also ask them whether they would like to be present at the time.

Where to get advice and support as an employer

Getting financial advice

You may wish to speak to a financial adviser to discuss the options available to your organisation should one of your employees be diagnosed with blood cancer.

Working To Wellbeing and Working With Cancer are two organisations that help people with chronic conditions to either stay at work, or go back to work when they're ready. Both provide training for employers, but are also useful resources for employees. Go to **[working2wellbeing.com](https://www.working2wellbeing.com)** and **[workingwithcancer.co.uk](https://www.workingwithcancer.co.uk)**

There are several types of insurance policy, such as critical illness cover and long-term income protection, that may be of benefit to organisations and their employees. Some cancers may not be covered, so it's important to check exactly what's included before taking out a policy.

Arranging external support

Occupational health advisers and employee assistance programmes can provide further advice to help you support any employees affected by watch and wait, and strike a balance that works for everyone.

If you don't have a dedicated occupational health department, you can contact your local occupational health specialist to find out what you can do to support your employee – you can find out who the best person to contact is by visiting the website shown below.

You can access free, professional occupational health guidance through Fit for Work. To find out more, visit **[fitforwork.org](https://www.fitforwork.org)**

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 Dr Sajir Mohamedbhai, Dr Sally Moore and Dr Kevin Boyd 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 2017).
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Because we face it together

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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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