

CANCER IN THE WORKPLACE

MODULE 8

Returning to work after cancer

An employer's guide



Whether you've had experience of an employee with cancer or not, knowing how best to deal with the situation is always useful. This guide is designed to help you answer the various questions you may have around your employee's illness and how a return to work might be managed.

OVERCOMING YOUR CONCERNS

Every employee affected by cancer should be assessed on an individual basis, as everyone's experience is different. Many employees remain in work through their treatment while others may need some time to recover.

An employer may have many concerns, including:

- How much time off work the employee will need for treatment and recovery.
- What support they should provide, such as staying in regular contact with the employee.
- Management of work-related issues associated with cancer and the ability of the employee to perform all aspects of a job in the short-term/long-term.
- Limited knowledge and/or understanding of a particular cancer and its impact on the employee.
- Ability of the employee to undertake full contractual hours and duties, and how to adapt the role and/or the work environment.

THE EMPLOYER'S ROLE

While an employee is off sick:

- Maintain regular contact from the outset – as previously agreed with the employee. Phone calls, home visits or encouraging an employee to go to work for a social visit, a quiet coffee etc. are all effective.
- Reassure the employee about their job security.
- Send them company information such as newsletters or details of any changes within the business.
- Start to discuss any barriers that the employee may have identified and how best to manage and reduce their concerns.
- Consider how you can accommodate a return to work, discuss with work colleagues (with the individual's permission) and agree what support can be put in place.

Planning the return to work

- When an employee is ready to return to work, carry out an assessment to consider their needs.
- Encourage them to talk candidly about their concerns.
- Consider their duties and ask if changes to their work area would help.
- Agree a graduated return to work such as working shorter/alternate days and gradually building their working hours.
- With their consent, talk to their GP or healthcare professional about a graduated return to work and how this might be managed.
- Consider another, temporary role if they're initially unable to carry out their usual job, supported by medical opinion.
- Consider any training needs or refresher training to help increase their confidence and keep them up to date with any changes.
- Cover Health and Safety legislation.
- Discuss if they'd like their manager to let colleagues know about their return and agree the message's content. This could involve educating colleagues about cancer and the impact on work.

Once they're getting back in to work

- If possible, reduce any potentially stressful or challenging parts of their role such as meeting deadlines or achieving targets. This is usually a temporary adjustment.
- Provide appropriate positive feedback on their performance to build confidence.
- Suggest initially working with a 'buddy' for additional support.
- Be patient and monitor progress on a regular basis. It may be some time before they can work their full hours and meet the demands of their role.
- Be aware they may feel unwell again and could be at risk of further sickness absence.
- Close monitoring and discussions, along with any changes that previously helped may prevent it.
- Schedule regular meetings to make sure they're coping and to discuss the possibility of increasing their hours.
- Allow them time to attend GP or hospital appointments.
- Be prepared to modify the plan to accommodate unexpected changes in their health.

Any return to work will need to meet the needs of the employee and their individual cancer treatment and prognosis.

Even if their prognosis is poor or they have limited life expectancy, they may prefer to be working. If possible, speak openly with your employee to understand what may work best for them.