

Disability Insight

Take a look around you

Cancer and Work - 27th January 2017

Key points

- At least one in three people will develop some form of cancer during their lifetime. Many are cured.
- In Northern Ireland, more than 17,800 people of working age are living with cancer (2014).
- Remaining or returning to work can help in the recovery for someone affected by cancer – giving some normality and social contact.
- What you can do as a line manager and a colleague – above all listen, ask open questions, let the individual take the lead and be sensitive to their needs.
- Vital issues for you to consider and plan include: talking about cancer at work; absence and cover (if necessary); and return to work planning.

1 About Cancer

Cancer is a group of diseases which affect the body's cells. There are more than 200 different types of cancer. They are divided into groups according to the type of cell they start from. In 2014, the most common types of cancer found in men in Northern Ireland were prostate, lung, and bowel (colorectal). In women, the most common cancer types were breast, bowel (colorectal), and lung.

Cancers are caused by abnormal cells growing out of control. Research tells us that many factors can contribute to cancer development including inherited genes, diet and lifestyle, environmental factors, and infectious diseases. Nearly 50% of cancers are caused by lifestyle factors, including what we eat and drink and how physically active we are.

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2 How does cancer affect someone's life?

The way cancer and its treatment affect someone's life will differ from one person to the next. People may experience a range of physical and emotional as well as financial impacts. Common physical effects include, for example, pain; fatigue; sickness, and breathlessness.

Many people speak of a state of shock and disbelief they experience when they receive a cancer diagnosis. The person may have to cope with a range of further emotions throughout their journey, such as

- anger
- guilt and blame
- a loss of control and confidence
- sorrow and sadness
- loneliness and isolation
- fear, uncertainty and anxiety

Worries about work and finances may contribute to these feelings.

Many people who are living with cancer say that their wellbeing keeps changing all the time, from one week or day to the next. For this reason, predicting what impact cancer and its treatment will have on someone's ability to work is very difficult. Some people may have to give up their job because the symptoms make it impossible to work. In other cases, people will be able to carry on working, but they may still need some time off.

To read and listen to people tell their own story of living with cancer click on any of the links below:

<http://www.becancerawareni.info/>

<http://cancerni.net/content/personal-experiences>

<http://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/resources-and-publications/stories>

You can get further information on how cancer affects people through any of the following websites: Cancer Research UK under 'Coping with cancer'; Macmillan under 'How cancer affects people' and 'Cancer and your feelings'.

3 Supporting someone with cancer in work

Information available from the voluntary sector suggests that for many people living with cancer work is an important issue. Work can be a stress factor, worrying about finances and the question 'will I keep my job?' At the same time,

work can help: a positive distraction, a space where you don't have to think about being ill and work can be part of the recovery, giving normality, routine, and self-esteem.

People who are living with cancer highlight a number of key ways in which line managers and colleagues can make things easier for the person affected.

- **Talking about cancer** - For many, breaking the news to their line manager is a difficult step as they are still in a state of shock. As a line manager, find a private place to talk to your member of staff. Be sensitive. Ask open questions. You may have to hold back some of your questions (such as 'when will you be back?'). Respect the individual's right to privacy. Agree the level of confidentiality ('who needs to know what and who will do the telling'). Agree next steps, if the individual is in a position to do so. Let the individual take the lead. As a colleague, don't avoid the person. Ask simple, open questions. Their reaction will give you a sense of whether or not they want to talk more.
- **Absence and Cover** - Not everybody will be off during the time of their treatment. Don't assume that they will. Have an open conversation with the person as to time that they may need to be off. Speak to them about cover during absence. If you don't, you may create the impression that you don't expect them to be able to come back. Ask the individual what contact they would like while they are off. Keep in mind that their needs may change. Don't exclude them from social occasions while they are off.
- **Return to Work** - Plan the return, together with the person. Be mindful that you need to stay flexible. Discuss when and how best to return to work (for example, flexible working or a phased return). Agree reasonable adjustments and implement them (for instance and in addition to the above, a more comfortable chair or taking regular short breaks) – you are obliged under the law to do so.

In some cases, even reasonable adjustments may not facilitate an individual to return to their previous role.

Working closely with colleagues in Occupational Health and Human Resources in all these steps will be essential to best support your member of staff. You can find further practical advice on the Macmillan website under 'If you're an employer'.

Finally, be mindful that the experience of cancer not only affects your member of staff. It may also affect your team and yourself, practically and emotionally.

Support is available for you and your team, including through Carecall, Occupational Health and Human Resources.

4 Supporting a member of staff who is a carer for a person living with cancer

The key messages above also apply when a member of staff discloses to you that they care for a person who has been diagnosed with cancer. Further advice on how best to support your staff in these circumstances is also available on the Macmillan website under 'Supporting carers'.

5 Support for you if you care for somebody with cancer

Caring for somebody who is living with cancer can be a very difficult time. A number of voluntary organisations provide dedicated information and support to you as a carer. You can find out more through their websites, including Macmillan under 'If you're a carer'; Cancer Focus under 'Patient support'; Action Cancer under 'Support and Therapeutic Services'; BRCA Link NI; Marie Curie under 'Being there'. Carecall, the free and confidential helpline, is there for you anytime. Whilst fully respecting your right to privacy, telling your line manager will allow you to draw on additional support at work.

Sources and further reading

<http://www.becancerawareni.info/>

<https://cancerfocusni.org>

<http://www.actioncancer.org>

<https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/>

<http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/>

<http://www.brcani.co.uk/>

<http://www.macmillan.org.uk>

<http://cancerni.net/>

