



Supporting employees with cancer in the workplace

Sadly, in the UK, one in two people will develop cancer in their lifetime and around 1 million working-age people currently have cancer. There are lots of things you can put in place to help employees who are diagnosed with cancer to make their work life easier.

Here is our guide to understanding your responsibilities and how you can help

What is the Equality Act?

The act legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society. There are nine protected characteristics under this act including disability, gender, sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity and age.

The act defines disability as 'a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities.'

Is cancer a disability?

A lot of people don't realise that cancer is classed as a disability from the point of diagnosis onwards. It is a long-term health condition which often means ongoing, complex treatments that can have a profound effect on a person's ability to do their daily activities. They may also develop additional disabilities as a result of their treatment or type of cancer.

People with cancer are protected from discrimination in the workplace including during the recruitment process. Discrimination can take different forms, for example, rejecting a job application from someone with cancer or making them redundant due to their diagnosis.

Is cancer in remission considered a disability?

The protection against discrimination does not end when treatment does, including if you no longer have cancer after treatment. Many people will be on medication or under increased medical supervision for years after their cancer has been cleared. They may also develop side effects or additional disabilities as a result of their treatments or condition.

What are reasonable adjustments?

Reasonable adjustments are changes made by an employer to reduce or remove a barrier relating to a person's disability. For example, this could include changing a rota to allow for extra resting time if someone is in cancer recovery or moving a desk to the ground floor so someone doesn't need to walk too far. Each adjustment will be unique to the individual and should be decided on after a consultation with them. Don't assume that you know what will work for someone or that all people with cancer will have the same requests.

If you are able to implement the requests, keep checking in with your colleague to see if the changes have had a positive impact or if more changes need to be made.

You can refuse an adjustment but you must have grounds to do so.

A company or organisation may take this into account:

- How practical it is
- Costs
- How much the adjustment will help

- The effect on your team
- Company size and the resources it has

Access to work scheme

This is a government scheme that can help disabled people to stay in work. The support you can access will depend on a person's different needs. It could be extra funding to pay for someone to help with practical tasks, mental health support at work or money for adaptations to your car.

There are lots of different ways that Access to Work could help. It cannot pay for reasonable adjustments as these should be covered by your workplace.

You can apply by visiting the [Access to Work website](#)

Interviews

Going for a job interview can be nerve-racking enough, let alone when someone has had/or currently has cancer. Candidates can worry unsure what to disclose and how much. They may be worried that they will not get the job if they disclose their diagnosis. They are not legally required to disclose but some candidates may choose to do so as a sign of trust and to be honest with any new employer.

If someone does disclose their diagnosis, you cannot withdraw a job offer as a result if they are otherwise a good match for the position. This may leave the candidate with a case for discrimination.

Some of the ways you can support a person who has had/currently has cancer at a job interview:

- Check if someone requires any adjustments made before the interview such as extra breaks or having the interview at a particular time of the day.
- Could you hold the interviews online to prevent someone from having to travel to the office? Or if they have to come in, could you hold the interview on the ground floor or near a bathroom?

This can help anyone who may need the toilet more frequently as a result of their medication or diagnosis. It can also be helpful if someone has fatigue or is in pain not to have to go up the stairs or walk long distances. If you have a lift, offer someone the option of taking the lift instead of stairs.

- Offer the candidate a drink of water or allow them to have access to their own water throughout the interview. Someone may need have a dry mouth as a result of their medication or be extra thirsty.

Examples of reasonable adjustments

Each person is different and will have unique access requirements. Although it's tempting to think, one size fits all when it comes to reasonable adjustments, you will need to speak to an employee or team member to find out what they need rather than assuming.

Here are just some examples

Allow regular breaks

Cancer and treatments can be exhausting leaving someone struggling to maintain the workload they had before they became ill. Allowing regular breaks, especially if their workload is physical, can help them to rest. Try to be flexible with when, where and how often someone needs to take a break.

Could you provide a quiet space where someone can go to rest?

Phased returns to work

If someone has had time off for cancer treatment, developing a plan where they gradually increase their working hours can help them ease back into the office.

This can be done slowly over time and can help you recognise how many hours work best for someone during their recovery time.

Work hour changes

A person with cancer/in recovery may need to go part-time or have flexible start or finish times. This could be to accommodate hospital visits, check-ups or treatments but could also be helpful if they are feeling unwell or exhausted. Allow time for employees to make appointments or go for treatments.

More support

Recovery is never straightforward and will be unique to each person. Encourage a culture of regular catch-ups and trust, where someone feels they can come to you if they want to and discuss their needs. Be flexible and understand that while you have agreed on a set plan, a person's treatments or side effects can often mean these have to be changed.

Lighten the workload

A person with/in recovery from cancer may need to have a lighter workload than before they were sick. Could you temporarily adjust the job description to facilitate this or assign different tasks to other employees? Also, could you split a task between two employees therefore making the workload a bit lighter?

If a job has a physical element that may be hard for that person, could you switch their role or responsibilities to something less demanding? This could be moving a person to a desk-based role temporarily.

Change targets

Targets are stressful at the best of times let alone if someone is undergoing cancer treatment or feeling unwell. They may not be able to meet the same level of target as they did before or their time off may mean it is impossible to be at work to achieve them.

Many people with cancer may find their energy levels, emotional well-being or performance at work changes as a result.

Be flexible, understanding and make allowances for someone who may be experiencing this. You could reduce the numbers that they are required to hit to reach the target or lower the number of customer calls they must answer to accommodate them.

Safe spaces for medication and understanding

Many cancer patients may have to rely on strong medication such as painkillers or have needles around due to regular injections. Is there somewhere that a person can safely store their medication without it being accessed by others? Is there a fridge or space in a fridge where someone could store medication that needs to be refrigerated?

Some cancer patients may be prescribed medications such as medical cannabis. Clinics across England are allowed to prescribe cannabis for cancer nausea or pain in different amounts either as oil to be taken orally, flower for vaping or creams for application to the skin. A medical cannabis patient will have proof of their prescription. It's worth being aware of this if your business operates searches or drug testing.

Nearby parking spaces

Cancer can be exhausting and so can treatment. Could you help an employee by giving them a designated car space near the office, so they don't have to walk far? Could you allow them to use the accessible car parking spaces?

Nearby toilets and breaks

Some cancer symptoms and treatment side effects can come with upset stomachs, nausea and diarrhoea. You will need to be more understanding that someone may need more toilet breaks than normal or they may prefer to use a quieter bathroom, so they aren't overheard and don't have to worry about a toilet being occupied.

Could you allow someone to move their desk, so it is nearer the bathroom?

Assistive equipment

There are lots of different items that can change existing workspaces for people with cancer. For example, some cancers may make sitting down for long periods difficult, could you bring in standing desks? If you cannot do standing desks, then could you supply cushions or different chairs? Some hospitals may give their employees special cushions to use that can be added to individual chairs.

Desk chairs with neck support might help someone struggling with fatigue or back pain. Voice-activated software or apps such as Otter may help someone to type if they can't due to pain or shaking.

In the case of equipment, it is up to the employer to decide what is reasonable and what is not. Different organisations will have different resources and finances. While it may be a reasonable expense to provide someone with a new chair that can help them sit comfortably, installing an expensive lift in an old building may not be possible and would not be reasonable.

Wheelchair users and reasonable adjustments

Some staff members who develop cancer may need to use a wheel/power chair or other mobility aids when they did not before. This could mean making adjustments to your office space to accommodate.

Here are some of the changes you could make:

Venue audits and planning

If someone is returning to work and needs to use a wheelchair, doing an office space audit is a great idea. Look at the office in terms of access: are there steps? Raised kerbs? Could you install ramps or change the outside of the building with permanent-accessible features? Is the office positioned on a slope or steep hill that might make someone's journey difficult? Is there public transport access or accessible parking?

Front door and ramps

It is recommended that entrances be step-free with a level threshold of less than 15mm. Where this isn't possible, you need to invest in a good-quality ramp which can be used when needed. Although some offices may not be able to add portable ramps, each building will have individual requirements, but you need to be able to think about alternative solutions if you cannot have a ramp.

It is worth doing a walk around the office with this in mind to see where you need step-free access to be added. Check with your head office, builders or the building owner (if you are renting) about what can be added or removed or what alternatives they could provide.

It's worth checking if there is an alternative access route, one that you wouldn't mind taking yourself. This means ensuring that it's not through dark alleyways or refuse collection areas or anywhere nasty!

Push button / automatic doors

Can someone physically get into the office? Often doors are heavy and it's not always the best weather conditions to have them open all the time. Ideally, someone should be able to open them with one hand and they should not be too heavy.

You could install a doorbell/ button that someone can hit to activate an automatic door. These also need to be fitted at a height where people can reach them if they are using a wheelchair at a height of 900mm.

Door width also needs to be taken into consideration. It may not be possible to change the width but if it is, then a doorway must be at least 32 inches wide. Ensure any plants or office clutter are kept away from the entrances.

Lifts and the second floor

If the office has more than just the ground floor, then you will need a lift where possible. You will need to liaise with the landlords or your head office to make sure they are in working order and have sturdy handrails

inside that people can grab. Check people can use the lifts easily and independently.

Keep the lifts free of clutter and available for people when needed. They should also be clean, signposted and in working order. If you cannot install a lift, could you relocate someone's desk to the ground floor? This could also help people with cancer who are not wheelchair users but may have less energy due to their illness or fatigue.

Layout

People need space to manoeuvre so this means measuring space around tables. The width of a standard manual wheelchair varies but is usually less than 76cm. Electric wheelchairs and scooters might be wider so there needs to be room to move. A minimum width for this to work should be 120cm (180cm is ideal) and there needs to be enough space for wheelchair users to be able to turn around when needed.

It is not always just step-free access that you need to think about as internal door frames may need to be a certain width or hallways. Implement a uniform flooring surface (all one height or with gentle slopes) throughout the store to assist individuals using wheelchairs.

Accessible toilets

There are lots of considerations when it comes to accessible toilets.

- Is the accessible toilet easy to find and well-signposted?
- Is the door easy to open? Is there a power-operated door and are controls at a height easily reached by a wheelchair user? If the door is not power operated how easy is it to open? Could you easily do this with one hand?
- Are grab rails provided?
- Is there room for someone to be able to position a wheelchair and transfer to the toilet from both the side and in front of the toilet?

You will need to check that the red cords are in good working condition. Red cords help to ensure the safety of people who may lose their balance or need assistance. This needs to be in a position where if someone does fall, they can reach the cord, and it needs to be left untangled and untied. If staff are checking the bathrooms, do they also check on the red cords as part of their duties? If not, who is responsible for this?

The accessible toilets need to be left unlocked, or a spare radar key left at the till in a place where shop assistants know to find it. Not everyone may have access to a radar key so there should be one available. Radar keys are a national scheme which provides a standard key that can be used across the UK. The key should be easily accessed and available to staff who should know what and where it is.

Charging ports and spaces for wheel/powerchair users

Someone with cancer may need new mobility aids that they didn't before. This could mean that they need a charging port and/or space to park mobility scooters or wheelchairs if are using them. Extra charging points can also help keep phones charged in case of emergency doctor calls and small fridges to store medications.

If someone is using a wheelchair then you may need to adjust the office layout to accommodate this.

Need more advice on making the office accessible for wheelchair users? Download our free resource which can give you practical tips.

Stomas and catheters

Some treatments such as those for bowel or anal cancers may require people to have a stoma fitted. Bladder cancers may require a catheter.

A stoma is a bag attached to the stomach that can collect faeces, and a catheter is a tube that is fitted from the bladder to a bag usually attached to the leg to collect urine. Both can be emptied into a toilet. Both of these can represent different challenges, especially in office life.

Dietary needs

Some people with stomas may need different dietary requirements. It's good practice generally to ask if there are any dietary requirements in the case of office events or meetings where there is catering.

Time management

People with stomas will need to have excellent time management and planning as part of their care routine. This could mean prioritising different tasks or breaking the day into focused work periods even taking breaks at set times.

Wardrobe choices

If you have a uniform, someone may need to request changes to their uniform that can accommodate a catheter or stoma. These may be loose-fitting items with elastic waistlines that can provide easy access for bag changes or feel more comfortable. Darker clothing can also help to hide stains.

Access to an accessible toilet

People may need a little extra space to change their stoma bags. Additional shelves and hooks which are usually found in accessible toilets are also useful too.

How to talk to someone with cancer

Act normal

For many people with cancer, it can be an extremely difficult time because they are worried about what this will mean for their health, family and, their career. It's natural to feel worried for them or sad but important to find a balance between sympathy and empathy.

It is fine to be sympathetic if someone shares the news of their diagnosis. However, a lot of people with cancer just want people to act normally around them by being themselves. Being overly sympathetic can come across as patronising especially if it is every time someone encounters you. People with cancer often want to talk about things other than their diagnosis to maintain normality or keep their spirits up. Just relax, don't panic and keep chatting normally.

No gory details

Don't ask someone for details of their treatment unless it's necessary from a work perspective. For example, you may need to ask if someone needs extra support or if their access requirements updated. It is also a good idea to set this example throughout the wider team so that someone can choose to disclose their medical details, procedures or medications if they want to. Rather than being constantly asked or it being used as gossip.

Keep it quiet

It is now likely that we have all had experiences with cancer in our lives from loved ones to friends or even personally. If someone reveals they have a diagnosis or are undergoing treatment they may have heightened anxiety or be terrified about what this will mean for their future. By sharing details of our own experiences, we may feel we are being empathetic, but it could also add to someone's anxiety. Share and empathise but be aware that someone doesn't need to hear the negative or painful details.

Care but don't share

It is not your place to share details of someone's diagnosis with others especially if it was shared within a workplace meeting confidentially. It may have been shared with good intentions, but people may prefer to keep their diagnoses and treatments private.

There may be times when you feel you need to disclose to another person but always check first if this is okay. This could be in instances where you need to discuss implementing a reasonable adjustment for example.

Check-in

Keep checking in with someone throughout their treatment to make sure that they are coping with their workload, feel healthy enough to be in the office or if their access requirements have changed. Also, it can show a team member that you care how they are doing and help them to feel valued.

Diagnosis is a disorientating time, and many people might struggle with losing their sense of identity. Regular check-ins can help them to feel connected.

Mental health

Cancer can be terrifying, especially at the early stages when someone is waiting on appointments or scans. It can leave people worrying about what this will mean for their future.

Signposting

There are lots of different cancer support charities out there. Could you signpost an employee to one in your local area?

Mental health first aiders

Some businesses have brought in mental health first aiders who are designated employees who can help if someone is feeling distressed.

Flexibility

Understand that an employee may need time off for not just their physical health but mental health too.

Be flexible when it comes to schedules, or potentially offer counselling sessions through work, mindfulness training, mental health app access, yoga classes, or meditation rooms.

Disability awareness training

Booking disability awareness training can help to increase understanding, education and increase the confidence of your team.

To learn more or book disability awareness training, visit our [helpful website section](#) on the different types we offer.

Supporting the wider office

It can be a really upsetting time when a colleague is diagnosed with cancer or is experiencing treatment. It can also bring up emotional memories of family members or friends who have passed away. Supporting the team as well as your staff member with cancer can help.

Support groups

Can you signpost to or set up support groups to encourage discussion and peer-to-peer support?

Provide mental health support

Could you bring in mental health apps or care access

Open door

Encourage staff members to come and talk to you if they need support surrounding the diagnosis or are feeling upset.

Coffee mornings or fundraising

Often, friends of people with cancer just want to be able to help or do something positive. Could you set up ways to fundraise for cancer charities or host a Macmillan coffee morning?

Resources or education

free resources that provide employees with educational resources can really help people to understand what their colleagues may be going through. This could be workshops, downloadable written resources like this one or providing phone numbers for support services.

Tampons, sanitary pads or bins in all toilets

While you aren't legally required to supply free sanitary pads or tampons in the bathroom, it is a nice gesture of solidarity to do so. Many people, even those without cancer, can get caught out when they least expect it, and it can be distressing when it happens.

It can be really handy for those with certain types of cancer to have emergency supplies on hand. For example, people with cervical cancer can experience heavier periods and bleed more frequently or unexpectedly between periods.

If this is the case, sometimes people experiencing this may prefer to work from home where possible. This may also be the same for those who experience diarrhoea or vomiting as a result of their cancer or treatment.

Sanitary products need to be safely disposed of to avoid biohazards or smells. While we often think of placing bins in the women's toilets, the reality of this is that some transgender men can experience periods or bleeding. Men may also need to dispose of incontinence pants or pads but be unable to do so and feel embarrassed. Save the awkward discussions and make disposable bins the standard in all toilets.

Pregnancy and cancer treatment

Quite often, cancer patients will undergo radiation or chemotherapy treatments which means they are not safe for pregnant people to be near for a period of time. This can depend on a person's treatment as to how long this is but usually, it is within 48 to 72 hours afterwards. Some people may feel well enough after treatment to go back to work with few side effects.

Extra care may need to be taken if someone is nearby in terms of desk spaces or using the same toilets. Providing wipes and hand sanitiser can help to reduce the risk. Someone who is pregnant or the person undergoing chemo/radiation therapy may choose to work from home for a few days.

Encourage testing

According to Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust, 80% of women in full-time employment were unable to book a convenient time for an appointment with 15% delaying a cervical screening as they felt they couldn't take time off work. A further 20% resorted to using their annual leave to attend a screening. Other testing may include mammograms or blood tests for different types of cancer.

It might sound simple but often allowing staff time off to attend appointments is made more difficult than it needs to be. Caught earlier, cancer can be easier to treat but people need to attend testing.

You could also arrange charitable activities to take place during particular cancer awareness weeks/months. For example, fundraising during cervical cancer prevention week in January.

Help with financial assistance or benefits

Financial assistance and guidance for those with cancer are vital. Many people will have to miss work or might not be able to return because of their illness. While every business will be different, there may be different schemes in place to support employees during this time. This could also include access to discounted healthcare or mental health help.

Are there any charities or government schemes that you could potentially sign post to? You may be able to talk to an employee about applying for railcard cards if they travel for work or schemes such as access to work.

Access to work is a government scheme that can help someone to stay in work if they have a disability or health condition. The support you can access will depend on your needs, but it could be a grant to help with practical support or funding to pay for equipment for the workplace.

You need to apply for access to work online by visiting [the government website](#).

Feedback

Allow all members of the team to feedback on accessibility. Don't just ask about the business itself but ask how people found the office space. This can be done through surveys, mailouts or simply asking people for their opinion. Understand that while it might be difficult to hear about problems, there may also be positives to how their experience went which recognise your hard work.

Want to learn more about different disabilities and the steps you can take to make your organisation more accessible? Visit our resource page for free advice on a range of topics around disability, D/deaf awareness or neurodivergence.