

In this month's newsletter:

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Nine ways to reduce the risk of cancer

Genes that control our cells to multiply and survive for certain amounts of time can occasionally mutate, which can lead to cancer. Although some mutations are out of our control, many occur as a result of our lifestyles and environmental exposures - and it's these mutations that we can do something about.

1. Regular physical activity

Staying fit and active in your daily routine will significantly [reduce your risk of at least 13 different cancers](#) – especially bowel and breast cancer.

Even fitting half an hour of a moderate intensity activity into your daily routine (like brisk walking) can make a significant difference. It doesn't have to be in one go either, three bouts of ten minutes spread across the day is just as effective – in fact [recent research suggests](#) that multiple small bouts of activity can have multiple benefits for your health.

2. Maintain a healthy weight

Being overweight or obese is the second biggest cause of cancer in the UK, and keeping a healthy weight can reduce your risk of [13 types of cancer](#). [Cancer Research UK](#) states that excess fat is an active tissue that sends out signals to other cells around the body to divide more rapidly, increasing the chances of them becoming cancerous.

A BMI of 25 or higher increases your risk, so try to keep it below this number. People from an Asian, Black African, African-Caribbean or Middle Eastern ethnic background are advised to keep their BMI below 23.0.

3. Avoid tobacco and passive smoking

Smoking is responsible for [72% of lung cancer cases](#) in the UK, and is also associated with at least 14 other cancers. According to a [report in New Scientist](#), every 50 cigarettes smoked causes one DNA mutation per lung cell, which can increase your risk of developing cancer. Breathing in other people's smoke, also known as 'passive smoking', also increases your risk of developing the same diseases as smokers.

4. Minimise alcohol intake

Although small intakes of alcohol have been associated with a slightly reduced risk of some conditions (such as liver disease), your risk of Genes that control our cells to multiply and survive for certain amounts of time can occasionally mutate, which can lead to cancer. Although some mutations are out of our control, many occur as a result of our lifestyles and environmental exposures - and it's these mutations that we can do something about. [developing at least seven different cancers starts to increase from the first drink](#). [Find out more about reducing your alcohol intake here.](#)

5. Eat a healthy balanced diet

Eating a healthy diet can help you to maintain a healthy weight - supporting you to reduce your risk. High-calorie foods and sugary drinks should be avoided, as these can increase your risk of gaining weight. Processed and red meat should also be minimised or avoided as these can [increase your risk of developing bowel cancer](#).

Focus on a balanced diet that includes a variety of fruits, vegetables, wholegrains, lean proteins and healthy fats. Try to keep things such as processed foods, sugar, salt and saturated fat to a minimum and only consume them in moderation. [Find out more](#)

6. Stay safe in the sun

Despite our weather, malignant melanoma (the most serious form of skin cancer) is the fifth most common type of cancer in the UK, accounting for around [4% of new cases each year](#). Figures show it's on the rise, with cases doubling for women in the UK over the past thirty years and tripling for men.

7. Check your family history

The majority of cancers are not linked to inherited gene mutations, but if you do inherit them, it can increase your risk of developing some types of cancers. If you are worried about a pattern of cancer in your close blood relatives you can speak to your GP who can assess your risk. [Find out more about your hereditary risks here.](#)

8. Be self-aware

Unusual lumps, unexplained bleeding and changes in bowel habits are just some of the things that can indicate the early stages of a cancer. The most important thing to know is what's normal for you, and to then be aware of any changes over time.

Maintaining a healthy level of self-awareness about your body and how you feel can be a really effective way of picking up changes that your GP can then assess further. [Find out more about staying self-aware here.](#)

9. Take advantage of screening

Routine screening is highly effective for early detection and treatment of cancer, which usually means a much greater chance of recovery.

The NHS runs national screening programmes for bowel, breast and cervical cancer. You should receive an invitation in the post when you're eligible but you can always speak to your GP if you're unsure. [Find out more about cancer screening here.](#)

Supporting an employee with cancer



In the UK, it's estimated that 890,000 people of working age are living with cancer, and 700,000 are juggling work and caring for someone with cancer. Many people continue working during or after having cancer, and will be looking to their employer for support.

People may choose to work with cancer for different reasons, such as keeping some sense of normality, and for financial reasons. Work can also give people a sense of purpose and achievement, supporting their health and wellbeing, which can also support with recovery. Colleagues and social connections at work can also offer comfort and support, and help an employee to navigate through difficult times.

Employers have a legal duty to try and make reasonable adjustments at work for employees with cancer. This is to ensure they are not treated less favourably due to having cancer – which would be classed as discrimination. We will explore reasonable adjustments in more later on, and look at how occupational health can support.

Supporting your employees will help them to feel more engaged and motivated. It will also help you to retain your staff and their skills, benefiting both the employee and the company.

Understanding the different impacts on the employee

Cancer affects everyone differently, but below are some examples of how employees may be affected during a diagnosis and through treatment.

Psychological – A cancer diagnosis can be a huge shock, and can trigger feelings of fear, denial, anger, sadness and anxiety. Ongoing tests and treatments can also cause feelings of uncertainty, loneliness, frustration and grief, which can lead to emotional stress.

As well as worry for themselves, an employee may also be stressed about their financial situation, how they will look after any dependants, and what impact it will have on their relationships.

Having cancer can also put an employee at greater risk of developing [depression](#) and [anxiety](#).

Physical – Treatment and side effects can cause symptoms that may include pain, fatigue, decreased energy levels, hair loss, weight changes, digestive issues and a reduced immune system. This may impact their ability to carry out tasks.

Additional supportive needs – Depending on the type of cancer, some employees may require support at home while they recover. This could put pressure on home-life and relationships.

Financial – Having cancer can cause a lot of financial strain and worry. Employees might be struggling to cope with keeping up household bills and general outgoings, especially if they encounter a drop in income due to things such as reduced hours or time off work.

Supporting the employee

Communication – From the point of diagnosis, take the time to speak with the employee and understand what their needs are and how you can help. You could suggest keeping a regular touchpoint in the diary to allow you to check-in with how the employee is doing, which can allow you to make any changes to support where needed. If the employee is off work, it's an opportunity to ask if they want to be kept up-to-date with any company news.

Try to remain understanding and sensitive - Going through a cancer diagnosis is a life-changing situation that can trigger a range of emotions. How an employee is feeling could alternate from one day to the next, and that is completely normal. It's important to remain sensitive and empathic to an employee going through cancer.

Understand the law and your legal requirements – The law in the UK considers having cancer a disability. In England, Scotland or Wales employees are protected from being [discriminated against at work](#) under the Equality Act 2010. In Northern Ireland the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 protects employees. This means an employee who has cancer or had cancer previously are protected by law from unfair treatment at work for the rest of their life. An employer has a legal duty to try and put reasonable adjustments in place.

Check if the employee wants their diagnosis to be communicated – Once an employee has let you know about their cancer diagnosis you could ask them if they would like their colleagues or team to be informed, or if they would like to do this themselves. They might not wish to tell their colleagues, and that is ok too, it is their choice.

Signpost to internal support – Living with cancer can impact all areas of life, so consider what internal support you can signpost the employee too. For example, if you have an employee assistance programme (EAP) that could provide support with things such as mental health struggles and financial difficulties. You may also have access to interventions such as online CBT or counselling sessions.

How occupational health can support – Occupational health can offer professional expertise on a range of topics to do with keeping employees safe and healthy in the workplace. This includes advice on things around job roles, absence and assessing risk. If your employee has cancer and you have an occupational health provider in place, a referral may be appropriate. Something to be aware of is that if you do want to refer an employee, you will require their full consent first. Below are some of the interventions occupational health can support with.

Risk assessments – These can be carried out at the point of finding out an employee has a cancer diagnosis, and reviewed on an ongoing basis - such as every few weeks as an employee undergoes treatment. A risk assessment should also be carried out as part of a return to work. These assessments will help to highlight what reasonable adjustments will be useful, and assess any changes needed to the employees duties. For example, a physically demanding job may have a different set of adjustments than someone who works at a desk.

Reasonable adjustments – These are accommodations made in the workplace to ensure that an employee is not placed at a disadvantage because of their disability. The employee should be involved in the process of identifying reasonable adjustments, as they know best what will help them to carry out their job effectively.

There is no fixed description of what reasonable adjustments should be used. This will be on a case-by-case basis. Occupational health can advise, and the employee can also give their input. It is then up to the employer to decide what they can put in place. This might depend on things such as how much the adjustment will help, how practical it is to make, cost, and how it will affect the employer.

Some examples of reasonable adjustments that could be considered include:

- **Flexibility in working hours, such as part-time or having a flexible start or finish time, so the employee can work when they feel able to.**
- **Time off to attend appointments, tests and treatments.**
- **Adapting the employee's job role as needed.**
- **Additional breaks to help manage things such as tiredness and fatigue.**
- **Assessing the employee's physical workspace to check if any changes are needed.**
- **Providing a disabled parking space.**
- **A phased return to work plan.**
- **Adjusting performance targets.**
- **Providing a chair for standing jobs.**
- **Allowing employees to work from home.**

Supporting a return to work – Work in collaboration with the employee to put a return to work plan in place. Consider what happens before the first day back, as well as what will be put in place going forwards. It can include things such as changes to hours and duties, and when the next reviews will be. This should remain flexible to allow for any changes. Try to ease the employee back to work slowly, and be mindful that it can be hard to understand how tiredness will impact an employee - so things such as workload may need reviewing regularly.

Training for managers – Supporting an employee with cancer can be daunting for a manager; it can be difficult to know what to say or how best to help them. Training can help managers to build confidence in handling sensitive conversations and knowing what supportive steps can be considered. If you have access to an occupational health provider they may offer workshops and webinars with useful guidance for managers. If this is not available, the [Macmillan Cancer Support website](#) contains plenty of support for managers and employers.

Self-help resources – If you have an occupational health provider in place, it's worth checking if they offer any selfhelp resources. For example, this could include access to videos and articles on topics such as looking after your mental wellbeing, physical health and ways to build resilience. These could be shared with the employee to help them look after themselves and support their recovery.

Supporting someone with cancer

The topic of cancer can evoke lots of emotions, whether we've experienced it first-hand, know someone living with cancer, or have lost someone to cancer. With one in two people developing some form of cancer in their lifetime, many of us at some point may find ourselves supporting someone we know with cancer.

This article will explore ways to support others on their cancer journey, and cover self-care tips to help protect your own wellbeing.

Growing your awareness about someone's experience

The impact of getting a diagnosis: Receiving a cancer diagnosis can be a huge shock and cause different emotions such as fear, anger, sadness and anxiety. It can also cause people to feel in [denial](#), and they may not want to talk about it with anyone. There is no right or wrong way to feel, and everyone's experience is unique to them.

Common feelings and emotions: As well as the feelings mentioned above, [Cancer Research UK](#) state that people may also feel uncertainty, guilt, frustration, loneliness, isolation, resentment and grief. There can be ups and downs throughout the process, and it's not uncommon for someone's mood to switch from one moment to the next. [Read more about how cancer.](#)

How to talk to someone with cancer

Cancer Research UK have created [this video](#) in collaboration with patients to offer tips on talking to someone with cancer. From useful questions to topic ideas, take a look to help start conversations with more confidence.

Practical ways you can help

Ask if they need anything – Ask if there is anything specific you can do to help them. They might not want any help, and that's ok, respect their autonomy and perhaps check in with them in future to see if they require anything then.

Support with day-to-day tasks – If someone you know would like some practical help with everyday tasks, you could offer to assist with things such as making meals they can freeze, helping with household chores and picking up groceries.

Provide a supportive environment – Try to offer emotional support, showing empathy, sensitivity, and a willingness to comprehend the different challenges they face.

Listening is also key, try to be truly in the moment with them, allowing them to talk and share feelings without being judged. You may feel hopeless at times that there is nothing you can do to 'fix' the situation, but offering a supportive ear can make a significant difference to how someone feels.

Offer support with transportation – This could include driving to appointments, treatments or to pick up prescriptions.

Signpost to support – Further down we've included a list of supportive organisations which offer plenty of information and advice for navigating a cancer journey. Things like helplines and online forums where you can connect with others may provide some emotional comfort. You may also want to check what local support groups or charity events are taking place in your area.

Looking after yourself

This is key when supporting someone else, whether as a carer or not. Helping someone can take its toll on our own mental, physical and emotional wellbeing, and it can be incredibly difficult to see someone we care about suffer. Taking care of ourselves puts us in a better position to offer our support to others, and can reduce the risk of burnout and emotional exhaustion. Some tips to help look after your own wellbeing while caring for others include:

Use your own support network – Leaning on the support of your own network can provide an opportunity for emotional release and help to give you strength during difficult times. Looking after others may lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation, so try to schedule time with others around any helping duties.

Try to eat a healthy nutritious diet – Eating well can give you more energy, improve your mood and support your overall health.

Try to get good quality sleep – Getting enough good quality sleep supports our physical and mental health. Try to get a good wind down routine, and find tips on creating a [sleep-friendly environment here](#).

Aim to include 150 minutes of physical activity in your week – Physical activity can help to improve your mood, boost energy levels, reduce stress and anxiety, and support you to stay physically and mentally well.

Make time to relax and enjoy your hobbies – Making time to unwind and engage in your interests can help to manage difficult times. It can help to reduce stress, restore energy levels and give us a sense of enjoyment.

Recognise if you need further support – If you are struggling to cope while caring for someone else, recognise when you need professional help, and if so, make an appointment with your GP to find out what is available to you.

Supportive organisations

Cancer Research UK – Support and information, including on mental health.

Macmillan Cancer Support – Lots of supportive resources, including help with cost-of-living.

Maggie's – A charity providing free expert care and support across the UK and online.

Marie Curie – Leading UK charity offering support for end of life.

NHS – Find local information and support in England.

Samaritans – Samaritan volunteers will listen to anyone struggling to cope or experiencing emotional distress. Call their confidential helpline 24/7 on 116 123.