

# Back To Work After Cancer



Marie Keating  
FOUNDATION

making cancer less frightening by enlightening

# About this booklet

**This booklet offers information and advice to both employers and employees about going back to work after cancer.**

This booklet includes a range of chapters for employees who are planning to return to work after treatment, how to make a return to work plan, employee retention schemes, talking about cancer at work etc. The booklet contains a number of interviews with cancer survivors who tell their own story of how they transitioned back to work after their cancer diagnosis and treatment. The booklet also includes some useful advice for employers on how to support their employees affected by cancer in the workplace.

We hope that we can give you the practical information, support and comfort you may need during a very emotional and difficult time.

## Contributors

With thanks to Erin McCafferty our health editor and to each of our contributors who told their story about returning to work after cancer.

Thanks also goes to CIPD, the professional body for HR and People Development, for their contributions and assistance in verifying the advice given in this booklet.

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There is plenty more information available on our website [www.mariekeating.ie](http://www.mariekeating.ie).





# 1 | Perspective of an employee who has had cancer or is still undergoing cancer treatment

# An Employee's Guide to Returning to Work after Cancer

Returning to work after cancer, or while still undergoing treatment, can be a daunting prospect. By planning a phased return and knowing what to expect, the transition will be easier.

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## Make a Return-to-Work Plan

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Talk openly with your employer about your concerns



Consider your duties/responsibilities and ask for changes in the workplace that need to be made. Talk to your employer about reducing stressful parts of the role such as deadlines or achieving targets



Agree a phased return-to-work such as working shorter/alternate days and building up your working hours



Talk to your GP or healthcare professional about a graduated return to work and how to manage this



Consider changing job or taking on a temporary role if you're initially unable to carry out your usual job



Consider asking for refresher training to increase your confidence and to keep up to-date with changes



Any return to work will need to meet the needs of both the employee and the employer. Open communication between both parties should make the process as easy as possible.

## Once you've returned to Work



Agree with your employer what you want your work team and colleagues to be told about your cancer journey



Schedule regular meetings with your employer for feedback on your work and to discuss any challenges



Consider working with a 'buddy' for additional support



Give yourself regular breaks. You will most likely feel tired at first but remember that your energy will increase over time



Be patient with yourself. It may be some time before you can work full hours and meet the demands of the role



Returning to work after cancer, or while still undergoing treatment, is an achievement in itself. Don't expect too much too soon



## Introduction

**Returning to work after cancer, or while still undergoing cancer treatment, can be a daunting prospect.**

Cancer is a highly traumatic experience and one, which changes a person's outlook on life. It's important therefore to be prepared for your return to work – from a mental, an emotional and a practical point of view.

Think about what you're now capable of and whether you need to make any changes to your working role, or to your work schedule.

Go easy on yourself. Ease yourself back into working life and avoid unrealistic expectations of yourself.

It's important to talk openly with your employer. Together you can make a back-to-work plan, incorporating any changes to your role and/or your work schedule, and agreeing flexible work arrangements, which allow for hospital or doctor visits.

It's also important to consider your financial situation. Your mortgage or credit agreements may have changed during your treatment. If you're cutting back on hours at work, your salary may be affected.

If you're concerned about finances, talk to your mortgage or finance provider. Consider also applying for social welfare payments for the days you're not working.

Most importantly, prepare for your return to work and make the process easier.

## While You're Off Work

It's important to stay in touch with your employer and if possible, your colleagues, while you're off sick from work. Maintaining regular contact will mean you won't feel left out of the loop once you return to the workplace.

Ask your employer to send you company information such as newsletters or details of changes within the business.

If you feel up to it, pop into the office from time to time, to maintain regular contact with your employer and your work colleagues.

Notify your employer in advance of returning, giving him or her plenty of time to allow for the necessary supports to be put in place. Agree a return-to-work plan together.



## Returning To Work – What To Expect

Undergoing cancer treatment is not an easy experience and typically results in side effects. Whether you're finished the cancer treatment or still under going it, expect it to affect your working ability.

You will most likely feel fatigued, especially at first. It's vital that you don't overload yourself with work at this time and if at all possible that your return to the workplace is gradual.

The last thing you want is to increase your stress levels, so aim to make the experience as stress-free and easy as possible.

## Treatment Side Effects

Whether you've finished your cancer treatment or you're still undergoing it, you're likely to experience side effects. Some people have side effects which last for months or, in some cases, years after the treatment has finished. These include:

**Fatigue or extreme tiredness** – it's common to feel extremely tired after and during treatment for cancer. Don't expect to have the same energy levels as before. You may also feel breathless and dizzy and struggle to do relatively simple tasks.

**Risk of infection** – chemotherapy can cause a drop in the white blood cell count, which could put you at risk of infection. Maintain good hygiene standards in the work place to avoid infection.

**Numbness or tingling of the hands or the feet** – some chemotherapy drugs cause peripheral neuropathy (numbness or tingling of the hands and/ or the feet). This is most likely temporary and should stop once the treatment finishes.

**Pain or limited movement** – wounds from surgery take some time to heal so you may have pain or limited movement as a result.

**Risk of bleeding** – after undergoing cancer treatment, you may find your platelet cells are low and this increases the likelihood of bleeding. Try to avoid activities, which could cause you to cut or to bruise yourself in the workplace.

## Treatment Side Effects (continued)

**Changes in your appearance** – cancer treatment can affect the way you look. You may have experienced hair loss, find you have changes to your skin or notice that you've put on or lost weight. You may also have scars due to surgery. Changes in appearance can cause embarrassment and loss of confidence for you at work. Keep in mind however that in many cases appearance improves over time as the body heals.

**Needing to eat little and/or often** – you may find that you need to snack regularly to keep your energy levels up after or during cancer treatment. If this is the case, bring healthy snacks to work and let your boss and colleagues know.

**Using the toilet more often** - you may need to use the toilet more often, after bladder or prostate cancer for example.

**It's important therefore to take these factors into consideration when returning to work. Don't expect too much of yourself if you have treatment side effects.**

You may also need to talk to your employer to explain how the side effects will affect your work and to discuss any necessary changes to your role and to your workload.

## Make A Return-To-Work Plan

Plan ahead and agree a return-to-work plan with your employer. This will not only help you in a practical sense, it will also provide you with peace of mind about re-entering the workplace.

Don't be afraid to voice any concerns you may have about your ability to do your job. Your employer has a responsibility to help ease you back into the workplace and provide any necessary support.

If, for whatever your reason, your employer is not being helpful in this respect, consider asking to speak to someone else who may be able to help like a senior manager or HR person. If you are a member of a trade union you could consider approaching your union representative to help you negotiate. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has specific policies with regard to employees who have or have had cancer and the workplace. Visit: [www.ictu.ie](http://www.ictu.ie) for more information.

Consider changing your role at work if you feel you can no longer perform your original job. Perhaps you need extra training or a refresher course? Or maybe you would prefer to work from home some of the time?

In Ireland, each company has different policies in place for those who have had or have a long term illness. Now is the time to enquire about what's available to you as an employee.

It's a good idea also to schedule regular meetings with your boss in advance. These will help you monitor your progress once you've returned to the workplace. It will also provide you with an opportunity to discuss any issues that may arise and work on finding a solution together.

You may also need to provide medical certificates so find out in advance what exactly is required.

## Plan A Phased Return To Work

You may find yourself unsure of exactly what you'll be capable of once you return to the workplace, or indeed doubting your ability to work after cancer treatment. Bear in mind that this is normal.

It's worth considering a phased return to work, which would allow you to work part-time at first, perhaps working mornings only or three days per week, and therefore easing you back into the workplace.

It means you won't find yourself worn out from work or unable to do your job properly. And you can slowly build up your working hours as your energy increases.

Your employer should inform you of company policy and/or support schemes in place for those who have had cancer or are undergoing cancer treatment.

He or she has a legal responsibility to reasonably accommodate your return to work, making the transition as easy as possible by making reasonable adjustments to your role.

This may include giving you time off to attend hospital for treatment, allowing you a flexible work schedule or making temporary or long term adjustments to your role.

Discuss a phased return-to-work plan with your employer. Consider his or her needs as much as your own, and find an arrangement that suits both parties.



## **“I was pulling at the bit to go back to work”**

**Margaret Roddy**

**Margaret Roddy loves her job as a reporter for the Argus newspaper and believes returning to work after cancer has aided her recovery**

Margaret Roddy has worked as a reporter for The Argus newspaper in Dundalk since 1992 and loves her job.

When she was diagnosed with breast cancer in July 2015, she didn't give it up but chose to work right up until her treatment began.

“Obviously I was devastated by the diagnosis,” explains the 57-year-old mother of one. “But I found working distracted me. I'm lucky in that I love what I do and my colleagues at work are my friends.”

She did however take a year's leave of absence when she began chemotherapy treatment, which was followed by a mastectomy and radiotherapy.

Luckily Margaret's employers were very understanding and she didn't have to worry about financial matters while off work.

“My boss told me to concentrate on getting better,” she explains “And it helped to know that the job was there for me when I was ready to go back.”

Although she was naturally apprehensive about beginning the treatment, she was pleased to find that it wasn't as bad as she'd expected.

“I was lucky. I wasn't sick as a result of the treatment. In fact, it was easier than I expected,” she says. “I decided to make the most of my time off therefore.”

She spent time with her pets, did a lot of reading and gardening and met friends for coffee whilst undergoing treatment. “I decided that cancer was not going to define me,” she says. “I was not ‘fighting cancer’. I was recovering from it, like the flu.”



**I would advise anyone to take a break or a holiday after the treatment and then return on a phased basis.”**

Throughout her diagnosis and treatment, she was very open and honest about her diagnosis and treatment and found that, for her that was a very important part of dealing with it.

She returned to work on the anniversary of her leaving in order to mark her recovery. She opted for a phased-return, working half a day per week at first and building it up to a four-day and eventually a five-day week.

“I was pulling at the bit to go back to work,” she says. “I’d made a point of popping into the office and keeping in touch with my colleagues while I was off. They’d been a tremendous support to me.”

She found her memory had been a little affected by the treatment, but she overcame this by taking notes throughout the working day. She was also very careful with hygiene in the office, due to her lowered immune system.

“I would advise anyone to take a break or a holiday after the treatment and then return on a phased basis,” says Margaret. “Talk to your employer before you go back and have realistic expectations of yourself.

“It took about a year before I felt completely back to normal, but now I feel great and I love going into work each day.”

## Talking About Cancer In The Workplace

After a lengthy leave of absence from the workplace, you will no doubt be questioned about your illness by your colleagues.

Think about this before you go back to work. Some people choose to be completely open about their cancer and what they've been through. Others prefer not to talk about it, or keep answers to a minimum.

Consider also whether you wish to inform your colleagues yourself once you're back in the workplace, or if in fact you'd prefer that your boss break the news to them in advance of your return.

By planning how you will talk about cancer in the workplace you will be better equipped to deal with the situation if questioned.

Bear in mind that some colleagues may not know how to talk to you about your cancer experience. However most are likely to be supportive and want to make you feel as comfortable as possible.

## Making Reasonable Adjustments To Your Work Schedule

You may be on the road to recovery, but the cancer treatment you've undergone is bound to have taken its toll. As a result, you need to go easy on yourself in the workplace, especially when you first return.

One way of doing this is to ask for reasonable adjustments to be made to your work schedule.

Under The Employment Equality Acts 1998 – 2011, employers are required to take 'reasonable steps' to accommodate employees with an illness or a disability and this includes those who have, or who have had, cancer.

**Do you need to factor in more breaks during your working day, or time to rest, for example? Perhaps you have GP or hospital appointments to attend?**

**Maybe you can only do light duties at first? Or perhaps you should consider changing your job description to avoid tasks or responsibilities that might cause particular difficulty?**

You might need to change your performance targets too to allow for the time you've been on sick leave or because you have limited energy.

**If you have direct reports, interim reporting arrangements that were made when you were on sick leave may need to be extended or reviewed.**

If you're on crutches or in a wheelchair after your treatment, you will need to consider access to the workplace and perhaps discuss the changes that need to be made, with your employer.

Toilet facilities are another consideration. Or you may find yourself unable to type and in need of voice-activated software.

Maybe you'd like to work with another colleague or 'buddy' for additional support.

Whatever changes need to be made should be discussed in advance with your employer.

By planning ahead and making reasonable adjustments to your working day, you'll avoid overloading yourself and getting stressed out, making the transition back to work as easy as possible.

## Agree Flexible Working Arrangements

You most likely won't know what you're actually capable of until you return to the workplace. On top of this, you may have to attend regular hospital or GP appointments.

It's a good idea therefore to keep your working arrangements as flexible as possible.

Discuss this with your boss, your manager or the HR department before you return to the workplace. You may also need to inform your colleagues in advance so they are prepared should you need a level of flexibility in your role.

You can agree a time frame for how long flexible working arrangements might last and when the arrangements can be reviewed with your boss.

Keep in mind that your energy levels are likely to improve as time goes on and that you will gradually be able to do more work and build up your hours in the workplace. As time goes on, you'll need less time for GP or hospital visits too. Recovery is a gradual process so how you feel now is likely to change.



## “You really find out who your friends are when you get cancer”

**Michael Daly**

**Lorry driver Michael Daly says being diagnosed with prostate cancer made him realise who was really there for him**

When Michael Daly's bother-in-law passed away from bowel cancer in 2005, he decided to get a full medical examination himself. “It was a wake-up call for me,” explains the 60-year-old from Co Galway, who drives an articulated truck for a living.

His GP immediately suspected prostate cancer and sent him for tests. Unfortunately for Michael, he developed septicaemia after his biopsy and spent two weeks in hospital recovering from it. “I was very unlucky,” he says explaining that it was during that time he was told that he had a tumour.

“It came as a complete shock,” he says. “I’d been fit and healthy all my life. Nothing really prepares you for cancer.”

“The cancer diagnosis affected my whole family too, as my wife Jacqueline and son Seamus would give testament to.”

Michael underwent a radical prostatectomy in September 2009.

Because his job involved a lot of lifting, he was unable to work post-surgery for 11 months.

“The recovery was tough,” he says. “I thought I’d be off work for three to six months, but it took longer. I needed to recover both physically and mentally.”

“Luckily my boss at the time was understanding and told me the job would be waiting for me when I recovered,” says Michael. “You really find out who your friends are when you get cancer. My family and friends were amazing,” he adds.” The cream always rises to the top.”





**Luckily my boss at the time was understanding and told me the job would be waiting for me when I recovered.”**

Michael was not paid while he was off work, but he did qualify for disability allowance. “It was a tough time financially too,” he says. “But somehow we pulled through.”

After 11 months off, he was looking forward to going back to work. “It’s important from a mental health perspective,” he says. “I wanted to feel like I was back on my feet. I missed the social aspect of work too.”

These days, he’s doing well and his cancer is in remission. But his outlook has changed. “I value my time much more now than I ever did,” he says. “I enjoy the simple things like sitting outside on a sunny day or walking the dogs. I now facilitate a prostate support group on the fourth Tuesday of each month in East Galway at the local cancer support centre and at the Midlands Cancer support centre.

“I’m more aware of the people around me that matter too,” he adds. “Everything is put into perspective when you get cancer.”

## Consider Your Finances When Returning To Work

Take into account your finances when returning to work. If you're returning on a phased basis, working part-time for example, you may experience a drop in wages. Consider whether you'll still be able to cover your monthly outgoings.

If your mortgage, a loan or a credit agreement was being paid by an insurance company while you were off sick, then this will most likely cease once you return to your job.

Remember that you build up annual leave while you're off work sick. This may cover a flexible return to work allowing you to work a reduced number of days a week for a number of weeks, while still receiving full pay' Check also if you have any income from occupational or private pensions or from life assurance. You might be able to freeze, transfer or cash-in a pension.

Financial worry will add unwanted stress at a time when you need to concentrate on looking after yourself and recover. If you're worried about money and how best to manage it, talk to your bank manager about what options are available.

There's no specific organisation offering financial advice or aid for cancer patients in Ireland. However a number of bodies can provide financial assistance in certain situations whilst you are receiving cancer treatment.

**Check with your local social welfare office to see if you're eligible for part-time payments. Also consult your local community welfare office.**

**The Marie Keating Foundation provides a 'once off' financial assistance through it's comfort fund to those who are receiving treatment for any kind of cancer and who find themselves in financial difficulty as a result.**

All applications to the Comfort Fund must be submitted by a health care professional such as a clinical nurse specialist or a medical social worker. The Marie Keating Foundation does not accept applications directly from patients.

**For more information, visit: [www.mariekeating.ie](http://www.mariekeating.ie).**

The Irish Cancer Society also has a financial aid fund to assist children and their families receiving treatment for cancer.

This is a limited fund in cases where other non-charitable sources are unable to assist. Visit: [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie) for more information.

Travel2Care is another source of financial aid for cancer patients who need to meet the costs of travelling to appointments.

It has a limited transportation assistance fund, made available by the National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP) to patients travelling to a designated cancer centre or approved children's hospital. It's also administered by the Irish Cancer Society. For more information visit: [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie).

## Consider Loss Of Social Welfare Benefits

If you've been in receipt of social welfare benefits while you were off work, these will most likely cease once you return to the workplace.

You may however still be entitled to some benefits depending on your income and how many hours you intend to work per week.

You may be able to keep your benefits through a process called 'linking'. This allows employees in certain circumstances to break their illness benefit for periods of up to three days and return straight onto it.

But where an employee breaks their sick leave for longer periods and returns to work they must have a minimum of 13 reckonable PRSI contributions paid before they will re-qualify for illness benefit.

You might also need to think about how many hours you need to work in order to build up your benefits.

When an employee has been receiving illness benefit for six months or more however, an application can be made for partial capacity benefit. This allows the employee to return to work and continue to receive a social welfare payment.

In such a case, a person is assessed individually by the Department of Social Protection. It's important that no changes are made before an application is processed and that written approval has been received.

**Talk to your local social welfare officer about what you're entitled to. Visit [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie).**



## “Financial worries made my cancer experience more stressful”

**Roisin Dunne**

**Roisin Dunne worried about how to support her daughter and feared losing her house while trying to recover from cancer**

When Roisin Dunne found she was suffering from pain and itchiness in her breasts in 2011 she visited her GP, but was told there was nothing wrong with her.

It was only when she randomly tripped and fell while walking down the road, banging her breast in the process, that she insisted on having a breast check. It was discovered that she had not one but two lumps, one of which was a stage 2 cancer.

Roisin, a single mother of one now in her 50s and living in Kilmainham, Dublin, needed chemotherapy treatment first to shrink the larger lump. This was followed by surgery and radiotherapy. The cancer had already spread to one of her lymph nodes so she opted to have a double mastectomy. “I didn’t want to take any chances,” she says. “I just wanted the cancer gone.”

When first diagnosed, Roisin was working three days per week for a charity, which deals with children in the inner city. However she stopped working as soon as her treatment began.

Her employer offered to keep her job open, but because she was on a contract and not permanent she didn’t qualify for sick pay\*.

“I was worried about how I was going to pay my mortgage and my bills and look after my daughter who was aged five at the time,” says Roisin. “It was a highly stressful and very emotional period for me and the financial worry just made it worse.”

Luckily, her parents stepped in and helped her out financially. She also qualified for lone parents allowance from the social welfare.

While she did get some financial help from both the Marie Keating Foundation and the Irish Cancer Society, Roisin found that there was no particular organisation in Ireland to help cancer patients’ deal with financial worries.



**The support for cancer patients in this country is really bad from a monetary point of view.”**

“The support for cancer patients in this country is really bad from a monetary point of view,” she says.

“I really think more could be done financially to help people with cancer. Worrying about losing your house is really the last thing that you need when you are undergoing cancer treatment.”

Roisin developed post-traumatic stress following her treatment and began to suffer panic attacks but found that there was very little psychological support available to her too.

“There was a social worker in the hospital who was great, but there was no counselling service available to me. It was a very hard time. After the treatment I was very weak. My hair had fallen out and I’d put on weight due to the steroids I was taking. I was trying to look after my little girl and to pay my parents back for the money they had given me,” she says.

Unfortunately for Roisin a breast reconstruction two years ago confounded her problems after she developed sepsis. “I had three operations in three days as the sepsis had reached my liver. I could easily have died but luckily I pulled through,” she says.

Since then she hasn’t worked but is planning on going back to her original job in due course. She urges people in her situation to take their time returning to work.

“I feel I will be physically and mentally ready to start work again,” says Roisin. “But it has taken until now to feel this way.

“It’s really important that anyone returning to work after cancer considers how they will feel under the stress of work. Your mental health is just as important as your physical health.”

\*It is no longer the case that employers can discriminate against someone on a fixed term contract

## Switching Roles Or Looking For A New Job

It's quite common for those who have had cancer, or who are still undergoing treatment for cancer, to switch roles or to change jobs once they return to work.

Some find that they're no longer able for the duties or the stress of the original position. Others simply want a change and a fresh start.

Think carefully about your role before you go back to work. It's normal to have concerns about your ability to do the job after undergoing cancer treatment.

Consider whether you'd like to continue in it. Perhaps you'd prefer a less stressful role, one with fewer responsibilities or different duties?

If this is the case, talk to your employer and/or your healthcare provider about your concerns. Discuss your options with your employer and find a solution that suits both of you.

If you're considering changing jobs, think very carefully about the new job and whether or not it could be stressful. If you decide to apply for a new job at this stage, prepare for the interview in advance. Consider getting some independent career advice before making any decisions.

Decide whether or not it's best to inform your new employer about your medical history. Legally in Ireland, an employer cannot discriminate against you because of your illness.

If you inform them afterwards about your illness and they withdraw the job offer, this is considered discriminatory.

## Protection Against Discrimination

It's important to know your rights in relation to cancer and the workplace should any problems arise when you return to work.

Legally, no one has a right to treat you any differently because you've had, or still have, cancer. If you have concerns over the way you've been treated, raise them with the HR department.

When someone is diagnosed with cancer, they automatically fall into the protected ground of 'disability' for the purposes of the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2011.

This protection from discrimination continues even when there is no longer any evidence of cancer.

This means that under Irish law, you should not be treated any differently from any other employee because you've had or currently have cancer.

For example you should not be passed over for promotion, be subject to less favourable conditions in your job, be made redundant or be given fewer chances in the workplace as other colleagues, because of your cancer.

If you believe that you've been discriminated against, consider making an official complaint. If you're a member of a trade union, you can complain to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, in accordance with the Statutory Code of Practice on Grievance and Disciplinary Procedures (SI 146). Visit [www.ictu.ie](http://www.ictu.ie).

**Grievances or complaints can also be made to the Workplace Relations Commission. Visit [www.workplacerelations.ie](http://www.workplacerelations.ie).**

## Giving Up Work After Cancer

Some people choose to give up their job after they have been diagnosed with cancer.

Perhaps their outlook has changed and they now value their time more. Maybe they no longer wish to deal with the stress of a working environment or the responsibility of a job. Or perhaps they simply want to focus on recovering.

Whatever the reason, if you decide to give up your job because of your cancer diagnosis take a number of factors into consideration.


Think about whether or not you will miss your job and whether it might be better to simply take an extended amount of time off. Make sure to consult your doctor or healthcare provider before you hand in your notice. It's wise also to inform family members and voice any concerns or fears you have about coping with being unemployed.

Also be aware that it may affect your finances. When you give up work, you automatically lose a number of rights associated with employment. These include pension rights, occupational and statutory sick pay, medical insurance provided by your employer and death in service benefit.

**Whatever you decide to do in relation to your job, make sure it is the right decision for you and one that will give you the most peace of mind.**







## 2 | Perspective of an employer with an employee who has or has had cancer

# An Employer's Guide to Returning to Work after Cancer

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 the employer's concerns

An employer may have many concerns, including :



How much time off work the employee will need for treatment and recovery



What support to provide, such as staying in regular contact with the employee. Consider what additional supports could be introduced to support employees across the organisation, as well as those returning from illness.



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 it's 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. Phone calls, home visits or encouraging an employee to go to work for a social visit are all effective 
-  Reassure the employee about their job security 
-  Send them company information such as newsletters or details of changes within the business 
-  Start to discuss barriers the employee may have identified and how best to deal with them 
-  Agree a return-to-work plan with your employee, talk to work colleagues (with the individual's permission) and agree what support can be put in place 
-  Cover health and safety legislation 

### When an employee returns to work :

-  Schedule regular meetings to monitor their progress 
-  Allow them time to attend GP or hospital appointments 
-  Be aware they may feel unwell again and could need more time off 

## Introduction

**It can be difficult to know how to deal with the situation when an employee has had cancer or is still undergoing cancer treatment.**

It's normal to have many questions in such a situation. How should you talk to your employee about the illness? How should you inform other employees about it?

What adjustments do you need to make to facilitate the employee in the workplace, and what changes should you make to their working schedule? What health and safety facilities should you have in place?

By preparing in advance both how to treat your employee and how to facilitate their return to the workplace, it will make the situation easier for both of you.

It also helps to read up on the particular type of cancer that your employee has or has had, and the relevant treatment. The more knowledge you have, the better equipped you'll be to deal with the situation.

## Financial Support For Your Employee

In Ireland, companies are not required to provide sick pay for staff. However, despite a lack of formal sick pay schemes, it may actually be custom to pay employees when absent due to illness such as cancer. Policies in this regard differ from company to company.

What's more, if an employee has a contract which includes sick pay entitlement from the employer, then they have a legal right to receive sick pay.

Employers in some industries, for example drapery, electrical contractors and construction, are obliged to provide sick pay under long-standing agreements.

As an employer, you should inform your employee about the company policy in relation to sick pay from the start, allowing them to make an informed judgment about how much time off work they'll be covered for. In cases where your company has a corporate health insurance scheme, ensure the employee is given full details of their entitlements.

Also it would be helpful to advise them of other external financial supports they may be entitled to such as social welfare; etc.

Advise your employees about your medical certification requirements from the start so there is no confusion. Make it clear if follow up certificates are needed too.

## What To Do While An Employee Is Off Sick

If at all possible, maintain regular contact with an employee while they're off sick and undergoing cancer treatment. Do this from the start to assure the employee about their job security and keep them up-to-date.

**As an employer it's your duty to inform an employee about company policy and company schemes when they advise you of their cancer diagnosis.**

During a cancer patient's treatment, send company information, such as newsletters or details of changes within the job to the employee's home by post. Maintain contact by phone and /or by email and encourage them to visit the office or to meet for coffee from time to time.

When the employee is thinking of returning to work, start to discuss any potential problems they may have in the workplace and how they might be overcome. Talk also about what to tell other colleagues and make sure the employee is comfortable with this.

Together you can decide a timeframe and a plan for the employee's return-to-work.

## The Employee Retention Scheme

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection provides an Employee Retention Grant Scheme, which helps employers to retain an employee, working at any level within an organisation, who has acquired an illness, condition or impairment that affects their ability to carry out their job. The scheme includes cancer patients and is open to every company in the private sector.

Public sector employers are already obliged to ensure these arrangements are in place.

Funding under the scheme is available in two stages. The first stage assists employers to hire people with skills from outside the company to develop a written individual retention strategy.

The retention strategy could set out steps needed to accommodate and, if necessary, train the employee to remain in their current role. Alternatively, the retention strategy could outline where the employee could be re-deployed in the company and the accommodation or re-training needed to do this.

The second stage provides funding for the employer towards the implementation of the written retention strategy.

This includes grant aid towards re-training, job coaching and/or hiring an external coordinator to oversee the way the individual retention strategy is implemented.

**There are various rules governing the scheme. General information is available from the Department of Social Welfare. Visit: [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie).**

## Helping Your Employee To Make A Return-To-Work Plan

By sitting down with your employee, ahead of their return to the workplace, you can agree a return-to-work plan, which suits both of you and will ease concerns on both sides.

As an employer, you have a legal responsibility to help your employee back to the workplace and provide any necessary support.

The return-to-work plan should entail a timeframe that is accommodating of a graduated return-to-work, such as working two days per week or only half days for example. It should also include reasonable adjustments that need to be made to your employee's role, reporting arrangements or to the workplace.

Talk candidly to your employee about their concerns as well as their wishes and abilities.

Maybe they're worried about going back to work fulltime at first. Perhaps they get tired easily and may need to take more breaks during their working day. Or maybe they feel that their previous role was too stressful and they need to off-load some of the work.

They could require a refresher course or extra training. Or they could be considering switching roles within the company.

At this point, you might also want to ask them whether or not they wish their colleagues to be informed about their illness and how exactly this should be done.

It's a good idea too to schedule regular meetings with your employee in advance. These will help you to monitor their progress once they've returned to the workplace. They will also provide you both with an opportunity to discuss any issues that may arise and work on finding a solution together.

If you require medical certificates in advance of your employee's return to the workplace, let them know now.

## Making Work Adjustments For An Employee Who Has Or Has Had Cancer

According to The Employment Equality Acts 1998 – 2011, employers are required to take reasonable steps to accommodate employees with an illness or disabilities.

This may include making reasonable adjustments to their work schedule, including flexible working, and if necessary changes to their role.

Obviously you want to make the process of their return to work as simple and as easy as possible for both parties so it's a good idea to talk about this in advance.

Consider what they'll be able to do and what will potentially be too stressful for them. Focus on their needs as opposed to the needs of the company.

Although some changes to their work schedule and role can be planned in advance, many employees will not know the full extent of their working limitations or capabilities until they've returned to the workplace so be understanding of this.

Perhaps some of their work can be delegated to other employees until they're fully back on their feet? Maybe they need to work from home on certain days? Or perhaps their desk needs to be moved to a different position in the office to allow them to use the kitchen or the toilet facilities more often?

Keep in mind that they're also likely to need time off to attend doctor and/or hospital appointments.

## Talking About Cancer At Work

It can be difficult to know how to approach the subject of cancer with your employee. It's best therefore to learn as much about the subject and its effect on people as possible.

Approach all conversations about cancer with your employee with the utmost sensitivity, taking into account what they've been, or are going, through.

Speak to your employee in a private setting, away from other employees and distractions.

Give your employee your complete attention when discussing their medical condition. Allow them to speak at their own pace. Encourage your employee to keep the lines of communication open.



## “I make the most of everyday after having cancer”

**John Kelly**

**John Kelly recovered from cancer twice but says it has changed his outlook on life. He no longer sweats the small stuff**

When John Kelly found out he was suffering from skin cancer he was shocked. The 47-year-old father of two was diagnosed with melanoma on his ear in June 2014.

“I couldn’t really believe it,” says John who works as a primary school teacher in Carlow. “I’d never been in hospital before and I’d led a healthy and active life. It was only really when I was sitting across from the doctor and he started talking about chemotherapy that it sunk in just how serious it was.”

Luckily for John, the cancer was caught early and once the spot on his ear and some of his lymph nodes were removed surgically, doctors decided he didn’t need chemotherapy. He was able to take two weeks paid leave from work, which was enough time to recover.

In February 2015 however, a tumour was found in his hip and once again had to be removed. The tumour was found to be benign but he still needed a hip replacement and once again had to take sick leave from his job. This time for two months.

“I informed the chairperson and the board of management at the school where I worked when the melanoma was first found,” explains John. “I also told my colleagues in work as I didn’t want rumours circulating. Everyone was helpful and supportive,” he adds.





**It's important that employers are sensitive to the fact that someone is recovering from cancer and needs the space to do that"**

John was permitted to take full pay for his time away from work on both occasions. He did however find that he had to deal with some work issues while he was off sick and that added to his stress. "Unfortunately, while these issues were unavoidable, they did add to my stress at a time when I needed to concentrate on getting better. It is important that employers are sensitive to the fact that someone is recovering from cancer and needs the space to do that," he says.

John has since changed jobs. He has also made a full recovery and puts it down to the fact that he took his doctor's advice and that of his wife Marie who works as a nurse.

"I didn't try to rush my recovery and I believe it has paid off," he says. "I'd advise anyone returning to work to do it only when they feel ready – if at all possible of course."

And John says having cancer has changed the way he looks at life. "I had to sit down and come to terms with having cancer," he says. "My outlook is different now. I no longer sweat the small stuff and I no longer do anything I don't want to do.

"I'm grateful for every day that I'm healthy and aware that work isn't everything. My priority now is my family and that has impacted on my life in a positive way."



## “Returning to work was much harder than I expected”

**Bernie Walsh**

**Despite her upbeat attitude and determination to recover from cancer, Bernie Walsh found returning to work extremely difficult**

Bernie Walsh had only ever been in hospital twice, when she had her two children, before she was diagnosed with breast cancer in November 2012. The single mother of two had enjoyed good health all her life and has always been active.

She worked in the pharmaceutical division of a distribution company, a job which she loved and in her free time acted as the chairperson of the Coolmine Musical Society.

She was 52 when she found a lump and noticed puckering on her breast while in the shower one day, and immediately made an appointment with her doctor.

Bernie was devastated by the news that she had breast cancer. She had two surgeries one after the other, followed by chemotherapy, hormone treatment and radiotherapy.

Naturally, she was unable to work whilst undergoing treatment but her job was kept for her and she returned to work the following September after completing the treatment. Despite the fact that it was a phased return to work Bernie found it very hard both on a physical and an emotional level.

“The cancer treatment had knocked me for six,” she says. “I found returning to work much harder than I’d expected.”

In her absence, a number of changes had taken place. “A young guy had been brought in to cover me and he was still there,” she explains. “I was told I was covering someone else’s maternity leave, and I no longer had my own desk.”

On top of this, she found herself very fatigued. “I was literally scraping myself off the floor each morning to go to work,” she says. “I just didn’t have the same energy as before.”



**The cancer treatment had knocked me for six,” she says. “I found returning to work much harder than I’d expected.”**

Eventually Bernie’s energy started to return and she started to do the things she used to do. In November of that year she appeared in ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’ a show staged by the Coolmine Musical Society. “That was a personal goal for me,” she explains. “And it was a turning point. From then on, I started to get better.”

And then tragedy struck again. In July of last year, Bernie was told that her cancer had returned and was in her spine. She was then working in product supply for the same company and again, she had to give up her job. Again she had to undergo surgery and cancer treatment.

This time however her new boss was a lot more understanding and went out of their way to support her.

“Going back to work after cancer is never easy though,” she adds. “You feel like such a loser when you’re lacking the energy you had before or when you can’t remember simple things due to chemo brain.”

Bernie would advise anyone returning to work after cancer treatment to take it easy. “Go home early if you need to. Don’t be afraid to turn down extra work and don’t stress over small things,” she says.

“The funny thing is that having cancer changed my life for the better,” she adds. “Now I just appreciate being alive and being able to do simple things. I feel like I’ve been given a second chance.”

Consider also briefing other employees on the situation but do this only with the permission of the employee who is undergoing or has had cancer treatment. Ask your employee exactly what they'd like other employees to know, or whether they'd prefer to break the news themselves. Remember everyone is different and some are more private than others.

If you're briefing other employees about the situation, expect them to ask questions. Encourage them to be discreet, considerate and kind towards the employee who has recovered from cancer.

At the end of the day, there's no right or wrong way to broach the subject, but a kind and understanding attitude will always be appreciated.

## Supporting Carers In The Workplace

As an employer, it's important to look after an employee who's looking after someone who has undergone or is undergoing cancer treatment.

Many carers are under immense pressure at home and this can affect their ability to work. In effect they're doing two jobs and this can lead to physical and mental fatigue.

On top of this, they're bound to experience a wide spectrum of emotions, ranging from anger or resentment to loneliness and sadness.

Try not to overload them with work. Allow a certain amount of flexibility in their role. They may need to take their patient to hospital or GP appointments on a regular basis.

Encourage them to talk about their situation and ask what supports can be put in place.

## Legal Rights About Work And Cancer For Employees

**If you need more advice about your rights as an employer and those of your employee visit: [www.workplacerelations.ie](http://www.workplacerelations.ie) or [www.citizensinformation.ie](http://www.citizensinformation.ie)**

## Supporting Employees At The End Of Their Life

Most employees who have had cancer live for many years afterwards. However, there will be some who receive an advanced or terminal diagnosis and who choose to work right up to the end of their life, which is their legal right.

As an employee, it can be difficult to know how to deal with such an emotionally charged situation. In such a case, schedule regular meetings and talk to them about their health and how it's affecting their job.

Make reasonable adjustments to their role and do your best to help them keep working in whatever way you can. If the role becomes too much for them, an occupational health advisor should be able to help.

Keep your colleagues in work aware of the situation and if necessary provide counseling. Try to be sympathetic and understanding to your employee at all times.

## If Your Employee Dies

If an employee who's been suffering from cancer dies, you will have to take a number of practical steps.

You will need to inform your colleagues in a sensitive and appropriate manner that the person has passed away and explain the details of the funeral arrangements. Be aware that this can be a difficult and emotionally charged time for both you and your colleagues.

Customers, clients or suppliers will also need to be informed.

You will also need to act as a point of contact between the person's family and work, or assign someone else, perhaps a member of the HR department, to do this.

There should be only one point of contact between the family of the deceased and work. The family should also be asked about the attendance of colleagues at the funeral. Obviously their wishes should be respected at all times.

Financial matters such as remaining pay, pensions or insurance may need to be settled. Any written correspondence should not be addressed to the person who has passed away.

Any belongings the deceased left in the workplace should be returned as quickly as possible and in a sensitive manner. You will also need to arrange for company property such as a company car or a laptop to be returned whilst ensuring that all financial matters are handled in a speedy manner to support the bereaved family.

Work left unfinished by the deceased employee will also need to be addressed.



**“Employers need to realise that everyone’s experience of cancer is different”**

**Lorraine Redmond**

**Lorraine Redmond found returning to work difficult six months after undergoing cancer treatment. She believes more leeway should be given to employees who’ve had cancer**

Lorraine Redmond was working for Marks and Spencer in 2014 when, during a routine mammogram at work, a lump was found in one of her breasts and she was diagnosed with cancer.

“I was completely shocked at first,” says the now 50-year-old mother of two. “I always thought breast cancer was something that happened to other people. I found it very hard to take in at first.”

Within a week, Lorraine had undergone an operation to remove the malignant lump, half of one breast and her lymph nodes. She then underwent chemotherapy, followed by radiotherapy treatment.

She was permitted six months sick leave from her job with full pay after which time, she received disability benefit from the social welfare. She returned to work in August 2015 on a phased basis, working three days per week at first and building this up gradually to four.

“My manager and all the staff at work were very understanding from the start,” explains Lorraine.

“I appreciated my job being kept for me. However the company has a blanket policy in relation to sick leave, which means everyone is given the same amount of time off and once they return to work they’re expected to be completely better.

“This is unfortunate as everyone’s experience of cancer is different. Some people take much longer to heal than others.”



**Everyone's experience of cancer is different. Some people take much longer to heal than others"**

Lorraine works on the floor of the shop. It's a physical, job which she found much more demanding having been through cancer treatment.

"I was still undergoing reconstructive treatment for my breasts when I returned to work," she explains. "My immune system was low, I felt completely exhausted all the time and the tablets I was taking caused pain in my joints. I sometimes felt like I was walking on cut glass."

She believes that employers in Ireland need more education around the subject of cancer in order to better cater for individual cases.

She does however believe that returning to work has aided her recovery. She enjoys the social aspect and it acts as a distraction. "I would rather be meeting and interacting with people and keeping busy than sitting at home worrying about my health," she says.

Lorraine would advise anyone returning to work after cancer to go back on a phased basis, working part-time at first. "Just see what you are capable of and then slowly build up your hours," she says. "If you're worried about money, contact your local social welfare office," she adds. "You may be entitled to work three days a week and claim for two for example.

"The main thing is you look after your health," she adds. "After cancer, your priorities change and your outlook on life is different. It's important to put yourself first."



## “Being self-employed when you’re diagnosed with cancer adds to the stress”

**Martin Fox**

**Taxi driver Martin Fox worried about his finances when he was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2011**

The realisation that you have cancer is a major blow to anyone, but when you’re self-employed, financial worry can make the experience even more stressful.

That was the case for Martin Fox, a 67-year-old taxi driver, based in Kilkenny, who was diagnosed with prostate cancer in November 2011. Not only did he worry about his health, but also about how to support his family.

It all started in 2010 when Martin was feeling unusually tired and upon investigation, was found to have prostate cancer. Having been fit and healthy all his life, it came as a major shock to him.

“People used to ask me where I got my energy from before,” he says. “But after the operation I felt completely drained.”

On top of having low energy, Martin who underwent a radical prostatectomy, had to wear a bag for months afterwards until his bladder control was back to normal. Living in Kilkenny, he had to attend numerous hospital and physiotherapy appointments in Dublin and he found the travelling hard.

“It was a terrible inconvenience trying to control my bladder,” he says.

To add to his stress, he had to take a year-and-a-half off work to recover from the surgery and during that time, he had no income.

“I used whatever lifesavings myself and my wife had and I also received social welfare,” he explains, adding that he also received advice from his local cancer centre Cois Nore.





**We still found ourselves in debt and had to renegotiate our mortgage and car loans.”**

“We still found ourselves in debt and had to renegotiate our mortgage and car loans,” says Martin. “It was a very hard time for us.”

Eventually, Martin was put on a waiting list for a sling. He had the operation in 2013 and hasn’t looked back since. In fact, he was given the all-clear in January 2016 and now feels perfectly healthy.


Although he is now back working part-time, it has taken him years to recover financially. And in the meantime his wife was diagnosed with breast cancer last year and has since undergone treatment herself.

Both she and Martin are doing well and the couple were able to enjoy their first holiday since Martin’s diagnosis this year when they went to Lanzarote. “It was great,” says Martin. “It feels good to be back on my feet in every sense.”

So what advice would he give to anyone in a similar situation? “I think it’s important to take things at your own pace and do only what you’re able to do,” he says.

“I could push myself to work more, but I know my limits now,” he says. “It’s important for anyone who has had cancer to listen to their bodies.”





# 3 | If you're looking after someone with cancer

## Introduction

**Looking after someone who has cancer, while you're continuing to work is far from easy. It can take an emotional, physical and mental toll on a person.**

If you find yourself in such a situation, it's important therefore that you recognise you're under stress and take appropriate steps to alleviate any added pressure in the workplace.

## Talk To Your Employer

Don't be afraid to talk to your employer about the situation and ask for help if necessary.

Often employers will be happy to help and support you in any way they can. Consider scheduling regular meetings, which will help you to monitor your progress and ask for help if needed.

## Managing Your Work Schedule

It's important to be realistic in your expectations of your self whilst acting as a carer and working. Remember, you're effectively doing two jobs at the same time.

Ask your employer for reasonable adjustments to be made to your role and if necessary, flexibility in your job. You may have to take the person in your care to hospital or to GP appointments for example, and therefore require a flexible work schedule.

Perhaps you need to off load some of your work or you require more breaks during the working day due to tiredness.

Depending on your circumstances, you may wish to work part-time or to change your role within the company to a less stressful one.

Discuss what options are available to you with your employer.

## Managing Stress Whilst Working

Don't be afraid to talk to your employer and colleagues particularly if you need additional support due to increased levels of stress at home.

Take regular breaks and regulate your stress levels throughout the working day. Enquire from the HR department if there's a workplace counseling service available to you. Many companies also provide classes in fitness, yoga or meditation these days, all of which may help to alleviate stress.

It's essential that you look after, not only your physical and mental wellbeing, but also your physical health, at this time. Getting adequate amounts of sleep, eating well and exercising will all help to sustain you.

## Relaxation Techniques

Relaxation techniques are a great way of letting go of stresses and anxieties that often come with a hectic work schedule. Taking a few moments each day to practice some relaxation techniques can help ease anxiety and stress and help you lead a better quality of life.

- Meditate/Mindfulness – relaxation of body and mind can help manage pain and emotions.
- Physical Exercise - regular physical activity keeps you healthy and also provide opportunities for you to get away to either enjoy some solitude or to make friends and build networks.
- Quick Muscle relaxation - teach yourself to recognise and reduce muscle tension. Tense and relax each muscle area to relieve symptoms of stress.
- Simple Visualisation Exercise - create your ideal location for relaxation in your mind. Focus on this image until you can feel your mind and body becoming calm and relaxed.

## Talking To Your Employer

It is your decision whether or not to tell your employer about your caring responsibilities, however, you should bear in mind that your employer may be able to offer you extra support or advice on how to balance your work and caring duties.

If you decide to tell your employer try to:

- Find a time that is convenient for you both. You may give as much or as little detail as you feel necessary about being a carer to your employer, but you don't want the conversation to be rushed.
- Write down what you want to talk about so can clearly discuss any worries or issues you have about being a carer and working full time.

## Talking To Colleagues

It is your own choice whether or not you tell your colleagues at work that you're caring for someone with cancer. If you do decide to tell your colleagues you may discover that other employees in the organisation are also carers. Having someone who you can share your experiences of caring with may be beneficial to you.



Marie Keating  
FOUNDATION

survive&thrive

**[www.surviveandthrive.ie](http://www.surviveandthrive.ie)**

[www.surviveandthrive.ie](http://www.surviveandthrive.ie) is a new online website developed by the Marie Keating Foundation. This website's aim is to be a practical and helpful platform for people living with and beyond cancer. The website is filled with cancer survivors stories, practical advice and strategies for coping with common treatment challenges and information relating to common side effects and symptoms.



## “Cancer made me slow down and prioritise my health”

Anne Mooney

**Although back working fulltime after having cancer, Anne Mooney takes everything at her own pace**

Anne Mooney works in the innovation centre at the Institute of Technology in Blanchardstown as a library and research administrator. She enjoys her job but after being diagnosed with breast cancer in April 2016, she took sick leave for 11 months.

Her first surgery took place in June 2016, but she found that she needed three more surgeries before she was cancer-free and afterwards had to undergo radiotherapy.

“I was initially shocked by the diagnosis,” says Anne who is mother to four grown-up children ranging in age from 17 to 35. “Luckily my cancer was at an early stage and I was quite healthy beforehand it so I didn’t need chemotherapy.”

Her boss and colleagues in work, she says, were supportive and there was no question of her not taking time off work. She received full pay for three months, followed by half-pay for another three and she had insurance to cover her income for the rest of her time away from work.

After almost a year however she was looking forward to returning to the routine of work. “Despite the fact that I had less energy than before, I wanted to get back to normal,” she says adding that she decided to go back part-time, working five mornings per week.





**I would suggest having a good chat with your employer and decide what works both ways.”**

“This arrangement suited both my employer and me,” says Anne. “I think that’s important when anyone is returning to work after cancer. I would suggest having a good chat with your employer and decide what works both ways. You might have to suggest the idea.

It meant colleagues in the office knew she’d be there every morning. At the same time, it allowed her to rest in the afternoon and prepare for the next day.

“I’m glad I did a phased return to work. If I’d gone back full-time at first I would be overly tired,” she says.

She still felt fatigued however after the first week but found this improved as time went on.

These days, Anne is back working full-time and feeling healthy. She says she no longer pushes herself too much but takes everything at her own pace.

“I find I’ve slowed down a bit in general since the treatment,” she says. “But it’s not a bad thing. It makes you stand back and ask why am I running around so much? Now I prioritise my health.”





## About the Marie Keating Foundation

Following their mother Marie's death in 1998, the Keating family promised that they would do everything they could to bring an end to cancer. They committed to provide all Irish people with the necessary information to prevent cancer or detect it at its earliest stages. Their collective aim was **"making cancer less frightening by enlightening"**.

Through its community information service, the Foundation's dedicated nurses have enlightened over 260,000 people on the causes and risk factors of cancer. The Foundation runs national cancer awareness and prevention campaigns on the most common cancers affecting men and women in Ireland. Through its Survive & Thrive programme, cancer survivors are supported after their cancer treatment.

Through its Comfort Fund, the Foundation provides financial assistance to people who are currently receiving treatment for any kind of cancer and who, as a result, find themselves in financial difficulty. In 2018 alone, over 580 families received assistance from the Comfort Fund.

*On 2 February 1998, our mother, Marie died from breast cancer. Throughout her illness, we could do nothing to help the amazing person who had done everything for us, all our lives. We, the Keating family, have set up this charity in her name to try to prevent others going through what our family went through. This is also ensure that such a wonderful person did not die in vain.*

**Take care,**

*The Keating Family*



**Marie Keating**  
FOUNDATION

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