

# Guidelines to HoUs on supporting an employee of European Commission with cancer<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction. The context:**

In 2020, cancer was the second leading cause of death in the EU, with 1.2 million deaths, which equated to 23.0 % of the total number of deaths in the EU<sup>2</sup>. The number of people being diagnosed with cancer could increase by up to 18% in 2040. <sup>3</sup> Estimates reveal 4 million new cases of cancer (excluding non-melanoma skin cancer) and 1.9 million cancer-related deaths. In many European countries, one in three people will be diagnosed with cancer by the age of 75.<sup>4</sup>

Thanks to advances in diagnosis, early detection and treatment, people are more likely to survive cancer and an increasing number of patients are able to return to work, or to (partly) continue to work during treatment. However, returning to work is not always easy, as cancer survivors can experience physical and psycho-social problems, including social seclusion and discrimination. Some challenges might be less obvious, including cancer-related fatigue, cognitive impairments such as concentration issues (so called ‘chemo brain’) and feelings of distress, which are often reported by patients.<sup>5</sup>

With more survivors active in the workforce today and in the future, the challenges and opportunities posed by cancer survivorship are important to understand and support. Realising the benefits of developing a care-friendly workplace in European Commission, agencies and delegations, will likely lead to retain skilled, experienced and committed members of staff.

With a growing number of cancer survivors in the workforce, European Commission needs to better understand and be equipped to help support them, given the challenges these employees may face. This precious For cancer affected colleagues, employment is more than financial security and healthcare benefits — it’s a support system.

To help address the unique challenges faced by colleagues battling cancer directly affecting them or a member of their immediate family, European Commission took the initiative to compose some guidelines / suggestions detailing how HoUs and colleagues as well as our HR team professionals can support overall well-being of our colleagues battling cancer. It can also serve as a guidance for handling all long-term and chronic illnesses.

Some people are unable to work due to treatment or the effects of treatment, but many are able to continue to work or to return to work after some period. According to EU-OSHA, out of the 3.2 million cancer patients diagnosed each year in Europe, close to half are of working age<sup>6,8</sup>. Most patients are highly motivated to stay at or return to work. Studies show that 62% of patients of

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<sup>1</sup> Author of the Guidelines: Eleftherios Stravopoulos. Member of the European Commission Cancer Support Group

<sup>2</sup> [Cancer statistics - Statistics Explained \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&plugin=1)

<sup>3</sup> [Cancer in Europe: 5 things the data tells us \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&plugin=1)

<sup>4</sup> American Cancer Society (c2020). The Cancer Atlas. Retrieved from <https://canceratlas.cancer.org/the-burden/europe/>

<sup>5</sup> European Patients’ Forum (2018). Recommendations to promote better inclusion of people with chronic conditions in the workplace in the context of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Retrieved from <https://www.eu-patient.eu/globalassets/policy/employment/recommendations-for-policy-makers.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2017). Rehabilitation and return to work after cancer. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/rehabilitation-and-return-work-after-cancer-literature-review>

working age return to work within 12 months, while after 24 months this amounts to 89% of patients<sup>7</sup>.

While cancer patients are protected from job, income and insurance loss by Commission Statute and other employment laws, we need to ensure these colleagues want to continue working during treatment:

- Retaining the patient/employee's valuable skills, knowledge and experience while ensuring business continuity;
- Saving valuable resources (financial and staff time) that would go into replacing and training a new employee;
- Creating an inclusive work environment and a positive image for European Commission as an organisation, which might contribute to attract talented workers;
- Fostering a greater sense of loyalty among affected employees and colleagues;
- Receiving more support from and boosting morale of other colleagues;

Some cancer survivors are eager to work because it provides a coping mechanism, enables a sense of purpose and motivation, boosts self-confidence, and fosters social support.

Opening the door for discussion and showing **flexibility is very important**. Cancer affected colleagues who feel supported by their HoU and colleagues will repay repeatedly in loyalty and gratitude. Colleagues see this and realize their employer cares about them.

### **How will cancer affect the work life in European Commission?**

No two situations are the same, so a cancer diagnosis will mean something different for everyone, from different physical symptoms and treatment to different emotional and financial burdens. If someone in your unit is diagnosed with cancer, or cancer is affecting someone close to them, we outline suggestions of what you can do to support your team members.

How cancer affects the work life of each colleague will depend on different things, such as:

- the [type of cancer](#), its stage and size, and whether it has spread
- treatment and its side effects
- financial burden of cancer
- the practical support they have (dealing with kids, groceries, cleaning, driving to medical appointments for treatments etc)

Some may need time off work to have tests, appointments and treatments. Others may need time to cope with their feelings. For example if they feel anxious, shocked or upset. Some people stop working during cancer treatment and for a while after until they feel ready to go back. Others carry on working, perhaps with reduced hours or changes to their job.

Cancer therapies may have different side effects. For example, chemotherapy may cause diarrhoea, vomiting, numbness, pain etc. Fatigue is one of the MOST usual side effect of cancer both due to treatments (chemotherapy, radiotherapy, etc or due to emotional struggle etc) This means that a colleague struggling with cancer may feel tired or exhausted most of the time.

It is a very common problem for people living with cancer. People with cancer-related fatigue may get tired more quickly. It may be very hard to do their usual tasks at work. Tiredness can make it hard to concentrate or make decisions. They may also feel more emotional and less patient than usual.

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<sup>7</sup> Mehnert, A. (2011). Employment and work-related issues in cancer survivors. *Critical Reviews in Oncology/Hematology*.

Some cancer treatments may cause skin changes, loss of hair, scars from surgery, missing parts of once body and other appearance changes that some colleagues with cancer may feel uncomfortable in meetings or in public.

It may time to adjust to a change in their appearance, to feel, and to feel less anxious.

### What can you do? Suggestions

- Talk to your employee to understand their needs. Is this colleague dealing with cancer or he/she is caring for someone in their immediate family with a cancer. Will they be absent, and if so, if or how long? It is possible the affected colleagues will not know at an early stage or they may have an unexpected recurrence or will not want to share details about their disease etc
- Ask what they would need from you and discuss how you would want to keep in touch. Employees are often very fond of their privacy during this period. You should find out what their wishes are and when/if you can call or visit them
- Try to identify if the affected colleague in your team is dealing with a mild cancer case and will only be absent short-term or it is a serious case with a long-term condition and how best to support them
- Clearly communicate their options, including that they can return to work after their treatment and discussing whether they wish to continue to work whilst receiving treatment. For that look into HR page [Return to work home page](#)
- Inform colleagues that they can seek psychological support from the Cancer Support Group of the Commission. [Cancer Support Group | Together 2024](#) This is a voluntary association of European Commission employees that had cancer or battle with cancer
- Since many of EU employees are contract agents some may fear of losing their job or having their contract being extended etc. Make sure to reassure them that this is not the case.
- Provide them with as much flexibility you can and if needed ask the director about the extent to which you can do so as it concerns their presence at the place of employment, at the office, the projects they work, the amount of working hours etc
- Give your cancer affect employees time for additional medical appointments.
- Agree which tasks are most important, what they can manage and what you can ask others to do. Is it possible to keep the work/projects run smoothly and be kept on track? Can other colleagues help with the patients/employees' workload? Do you need to hire temporary replacements? Affected colleagues should have the peace of mind and to be reassured that their tasks are being covered and completed during their absence and not to feel guilty for that.
- If colleagues want to keep working at the office, see if you could make changes to make their work less tiring. Consider reasonable adjustments to their work schedule.
- Offer them regular rests and even short naps if they need so –useful after an activity or a meal (All DGs, agencies, delegations need to create a quiet room for these cases)
- avoiding physically demanding duties
- Plan work around times when they have more energy.
- Some may as a side effect of cancer have trouble in writing. Coordinate with IT to offer them speech recognition software. If your computer does not have this software, you can buy it.
- See if they need a more anatomic chair / desk at the office
- Try to understand all these aspects and what colleagues with cancer may be coping with. It may be even more difficult to understand all the challenges they face especially if they look well.
- Taking a short walk with them on your lunch break from time to time to see how they are doing can give them more energy and help them reduce their stress.

- Make sure you and the unit colleagues make them feel welcomed and appreciated for working even while they fight with cancer
- If your cancer affected team member wishes and feels fit enough, give them the option to complete the project/s they were working on
- Ask the secretariat of the unit or other colleagues to help them with paperwork and filling in the necessary forms for JSIS for sick leave etc;
- Make sure colleagues with cancer (and long term serious illnesses) are treated in an empathetic manner by all managers and colleagues
- Inform them of options that European Commission offers to face to the expenses of their treatments and related exams (*Recognition of serious illness*: [Serious illness \(europa.eu\)](#)  
*Reimbursement of health costs*: [Reimbursement \(JSIS\) \(europa.eu\)](#) *Direct billing of heavy medical costs*: [Direct billing \(europa.eu\)](#) *Prior authorisation*: [Prior authorisation \(europa.eu\)](#) *Special reimbursement rules*: [Special rules \(europa.eu\)](#) Article 72(3)  
*SR*: [Special reimbursement \(europa.eu\)](#) *Special leave for a medical consultation or medical treatment abroad*: [Special leave for medical reasons \(europa.eu\)](#))

Be aware that employees deal with the situation differently - while some perceive it as a disruption in life or a very difficult period, others may think it brought life greater meaning. Be sure to adapt your communication accordingly. If you know this and recognise the differences, you will be able to better understand and support your sick employee/s. Those experiencing their illness as “disruptive” may need additional emotional support; whereas those experiencing their illness as a difficult but temporary ‘episode’ may benefit from an approach focused on practical support. The latter category may want to share or talk more about their situation.

### What colleagues in a unit can do to be supportive?

To respect your employees’ privacy and comply with legislation, you need your employees’ consent to share medical information and details about their cancer diagnosis with staff and co-workers. It is possible that affected employees prefer to inform their colleagues themselves

Ask your colleague with cancer explicitly what you can share with your team. Colleagues may know each other well and might be naturally involved in each other’s lives. Nevertheless, it is necessary to discuss this in advance. If a colleague with cancer does not want to share information regarding their medical condition, you should decide together what you are going to tell other staff about their absence to prevent possible gossip

If the rest of the colleagues are informed, they can help by

- volunteering in helping with their work tasks
- Have a card and/or a gift delivered (e.g., after the employee is discharged from the hospital);
- Invite colleagues with cancer to events, such as coffee breaks with the team. Leave it up to colleagues with cancer to decide whether they can make it or prefer not to come;
- Consider visiting sick colleagues at home (after checking if this is ok with them, what time is convenient, who from the team will be visiting them and whether they wish to discuss work-related issues)
- Volunteer to help with practical tasks, such as shopping and cooking.
- If they have children, offer to take them to or from school or activities.
- While they are on sick leave offer if they want to be informed about what is going on at work.
- make them feel welcomed and appreciated for working even while they fight with cancer

All the above mentioned suggestions may also be applied in cases where a colleagues caring for someone with cancer or lost someone from cancer from their immediate family and are going through a difficult emotional period