



The Employee Experience report: Living and working with cancer

A practical & insight packed report to help employers better support employees during their cancer journeys



Introduction: The clock is ticking for employers to make working with cancer work...

Every 90 seconds someone in the UK is diagnosed with cancer¹. It's a disease that's impacting more people, far earlier in their lives as an estimated 900,000 employees are currently working with cancer².

A cancer diagnosis throws individuals into a complex web of challenges, impacting their physical, emotional and professional wellbeing.

While treatment experiences vary greatly based on the unique nature of each cancer, the common thread of workplace disruption is undeniable.

Compounding this concern is the growing pressure on healthcare systems, with longer NHS waiting times and private healthcare - often inaccessible for many - increasing premiums by up to 20%.

It's a situation that places employers at a critical crossroads and prompts them to reconsider the depth and effectiveness of the cancer support offered within their employee benefits and policies.

This report aims to provide employers with insight into the impact cancer can place not only on the person who has received the diagnosis, but also upon their colleagues and the workplace.

To bring about greater understanding we asked 500 UK employees who have worked - or are currently working - while battling cancer to share their personal journeys and experiences.

And to improve the employee experience.

The UK cancer landscape



One in two people will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime.

(Cancer Research UK)



Around 890,000 people of working age are living with cancer in the UK.

(Macmillan)



393,000 new cases of cancer are diagnosed each year.

(Cancer Research UK)



Approximately 160,000 new cancer diagnoses are for people of working age (16 - 65 years).



Increase in cancer in those of a working age (57% in men and 48% in women) over the last 25 years.

(Cancer Research UK)



38% of cancer cases are preventable.

(Cancer Research UK)



Almost a quarter of cancer patients visit their GP 3 times before being sent to hospital for tests that diagnosed their illness.

(Study by Cambridge University)



The NHS 62-day target for patients to begin cancer treatment hasn't been met since 2015. Currently only 64% of patients are meeting that standard.

(Cancer Research UK)



Around 700,000 people at work are caring for someone with cancer.

(Macmillan)

1 Cancer Research UK
2 Working with Cancer

Research Summary

Openness, Support & Diversity: The Wake-Up Call



The healthcare & treatment mix

The NHS is still the primary provider of cancer treatment for **62%** of employees, but accessing private healthcare cancer services is increasing – particularly among male employees and those who hold senior positions at work.

Absence, the invisible cancer cost

On average an employee takes **15 weeks** off work during their cancer journey.

Based on a forecast of 160,000 people of working age receiving a cancer diagnosis this could mean a potential **£1.6bn cost to UK businesses.**

Employee benefits falling short on cancer support

77% of employees feel that their employee benefits do not meet their needs during their cancer journey.

How do employees really feel?

From valued to stressed and everything in between. Employees feel a myriad of emotions while juggling work with cancer, including **45%** feeling they have become a workplace burden.

Talent loss - a direct result of poor support

11% of employees plan to leave their job once they are in better health, naming the poor experience they've received during their cancer journey as the main trigger for resignation.

Returning to work

68% of respondents did not feel supported during their return to the workplace after cancer – with many feeling pressured to return sooner than they felt ready.

HR departments are not fully prepared

71% of people working with cancer said they felt their HR team wasn't prepared to help them through their health crisis – with female workers feeling this the most.

Workplace culture

55% of workers didn't tell employer about their illness until after a cancer diagnosis.

And **28%** of employees shy away from talking to colleagues about their illness altogether.

Why it's key for employers to understand the cancer care landscape

Cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming, and navigating treatment options adds another layer of complexity.

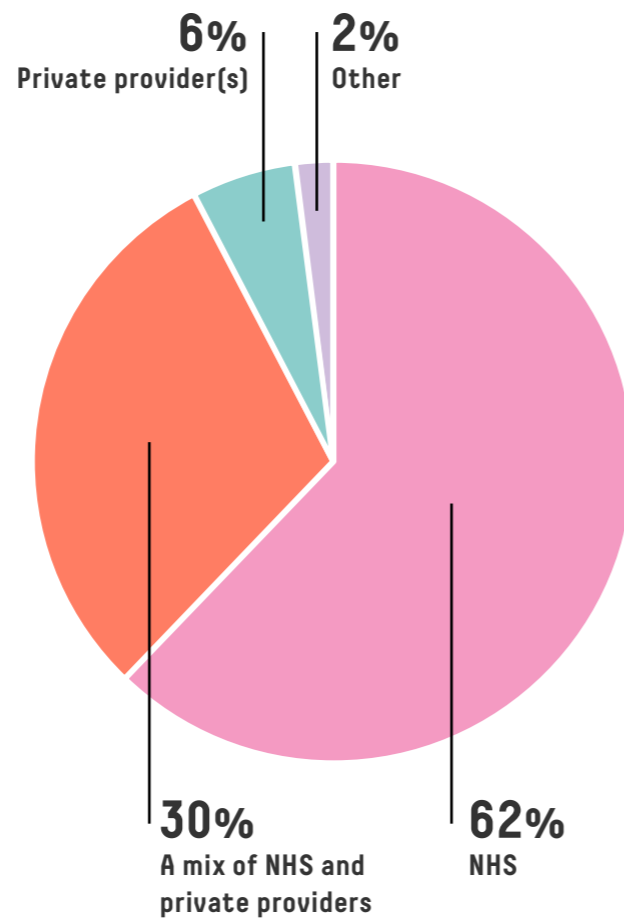
Our survey explored the current landscape of cancer treatment for employees in the UK, focusing on the utilisation of the NHS, private healthcare and potential inequalities within the system.

Where employees are accessing cancer care

The NHS is the primary source of cancer care, with 92% of respondents stating that they receive treatment through the NHS either exclusively or part of a private and NHS care mix.

Additionally, 6% reported receiving treatment exclusively through private healthcare.

Where do employees get their cancer treatment?



Gender bias in private care

Interestingly, our research data revealed a notable gender bias in the provision of private care. With 71% of the male employees receiving private treatment compared to only 29% of their female peers. This male bias is further evident when considering access to both private and NHS options, with 70% again being male.



Seniority and access to private care

The survey also revealed a correlation between seniority and access to private healthcare. As 64% of C-suite executives said they accessed private health services during their cancer journey, followed by senior management (52%), middle management (30%), supervisors (29%). In comparison, just 6 per cent of employees in junior positions said they accessed private healthcare for their cancer care.

Analysis

Despite increasing post-pandemic NHS cancer waiting lists, the survey reveals a heavy reliance on the NHS for cancer care, highlighting challenges in accessing timely treatment which may result in poorer patient outcomes and increased work absences.

NHS under performance has driven a demand for private medical insurance, but with increasing costs many employers are unable to support this benefit – let alone offer it to all employees.

Furthermore, our survey indicated that 6% of workers use private health care, less than the 13% as reported in the recent YouGov survey, highlighting that some do not cover cancer sufficiently.

However, new packages designed to support the 'whole of workforce' and include cancer care offer increasingly a more affordable solution for employers or individuals.

For employers who do offer private health benefits, it is important to recognise that the majority of employees will access both private and NHS services throughout their cancer care. This alone can present a number of challenges, not least in the complexities of navigating both systems – which can be both difficult and time consuming.

Our research also points to gender and seniority-based inequalities in access to private healthcare options, potentially exacerbating existing healthcare disparities and making the case for affordable workplace support options that offer broader access.

Just 63.9% of patients start treatment within the NHS target of 62 days (Feb 24) and over 100,000 people waited longer than NHS treatment target in 2023. Waits have worsened every year for 11 years. (NHS)



Counting the invisible cost of cancer

Counting the invisible cost of cancer

A cancer diagnosis significantly impacts an individual's life, and the workplace is not an exception. We explored the extent of employee absence due to cancer across different stages of the journey, highlighting the invisible costs borne by both the individual and the organisation.

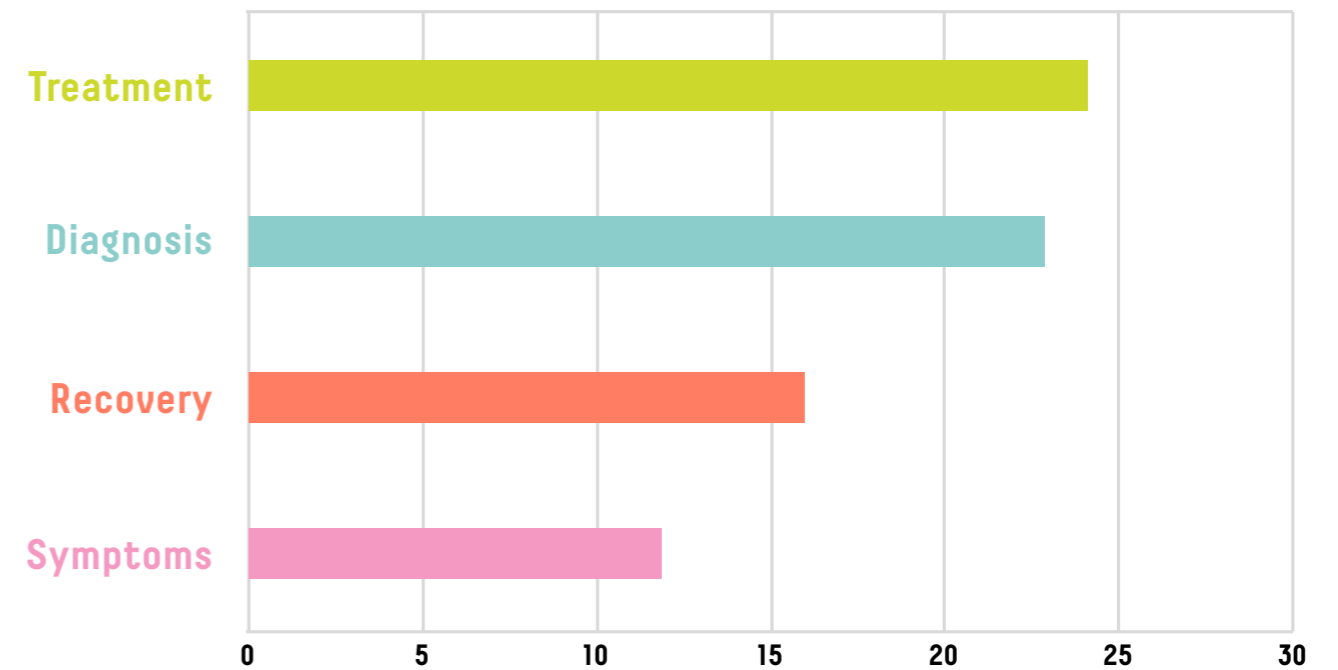
Breakdown of absence

Our research found that the average employee was absent for 15 weeks (approximately 75 working days based on full-time employment) during their cancer journey.

In addition to the expected absence for treatment and recovery, our survey clearly identified the need for time off work during the early stages when worried or concerned about ill health and before a formal diagnosis had been made.



Days absent by cancer stage



Notably, Lower earners (<£1,500 pcm) took less time off (13 weeks) compared to employees with monthly earnings of £1.5-3k and £3-5k/ £5k+ (15 & 16 weeks).

Analysis

These findings highlight the disruption that cancer causes to an employee's work life and demonstrates the different burdens placed at each stage, encompassing logistical, physical and psychological challenges.

Early detection is crucial in the fight against cancer. According to Cancer Research UK, around **375,000** new cancer cases are diagnosed each year and **38%** of cancer cases are preventable. Almost half (**45.5%**) are diagnosed at stages 3 & 4 resulting in poorer outcomes.

Employers can play a crucial role by offering flexible work arrangements and access to support throughout a cancer journey - particularly during the critical early stages (pre-diagnosis worries and symptoms) when early diagnosis plays a vital role in improved outcomes.

Employee absence creates a domino effect, with colleagues facing increased workload and higher stress levels. Line managers are also faced with managing work distribution, maintaining team productivity and complying with company policies and the Equality Act.

This absence translates to costs for organisations including lost productivity, workplace adjustments and employee benefit provision.

On average, each employee was absent from work for 15 weeks during their cancer journey. Based on a forecast of 160,000 people of working age receiving a cancer diagnosis each year means a £1.6bn costs to UK business annually.

Based on a forecast of working age people (20-68) with cancer in the UK (2020) and using the NHS CancerData as source statistics, with adjustments for unemployment and cancer incidence rates.

Benefit expectations versus reality

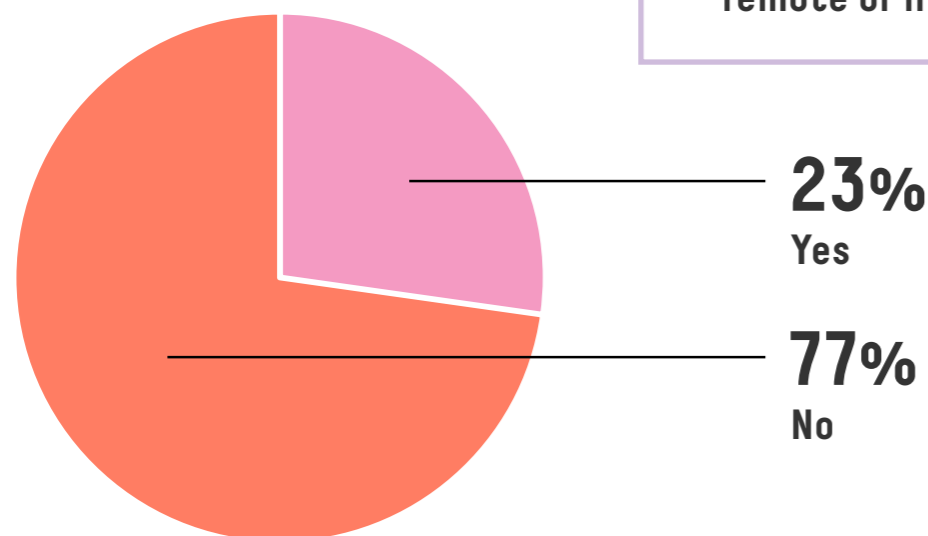
For working individuals, navigating cancer treatment and recovery while maintaining employment can be incredibly difficult. Employee benefits can really help lighten the load.

In this part of the survey, we explored what employees with cancer thought about the packages provided.

Employee benefits fall short of expectations

We asked our panel of employees if the benefits offered “met all of their needs” during their cancer journey.

Key finding: 77% of respondents felt that their employee benefits did not fully meet their needs.



The employee benefits offered to me on my cancer journey are meeting all of my needs

Breakdown of unsatisfied employees

Gender: 58% were male.

Income: 58% earned less than £30,000 per annum.

Tenure: 54% had worked with their current employer for 4-10 years.

Work Location: 52% were remote or hybrid workers.

Analysis

The views of employees highlight opportunities where improvements can be made.

1

There's a significant support gap for employees battling cancer - suggesting current benefits lack the capacity to fully address their needs.

2

Lower income dissatisfaction indicating a potential lack of support tailored to their circumstances.

3

Loyal employees are not exempt from feeling unsupported, raising concerns about potential retention issues and talent loss.

4

Risk of remote workers feeling marginalised when it comes to access to adequate cancer support.

Organisations should look beyond workplace cancer procedures and policies and review existing employee benefits to ensure they provide suitable and inclusive support for cancer patients.



Empower HR, don't leave them unprepared

It's during this difficult time that support from an employer, particularly through the HR department, becomes vital. We asked employees for their views of support during their cancer journey.

Are HR departments prepared for cancer?

71% said that their employer was not fully prepared to support them during cancer.

Of these respondents, females rated their employer preparedness lowest at 40%.

Support and advice

31% of respondents said they received support and advice from HR throughout, though this was lowest in the 18-24 age category.

28% said that their employer was providing 'enough' support (financial, emotional).

Analysis

We uncovered concerning limitations in employer support for employees battling cancer.

Most felt their employer was not fully prepared, highlighting a significant gap in support infrastructure. While some reported a quick response upon diagnosis, many did not receive sufficient financial and emotional support throughout their journey.

Concern and interest

Just 33% said their employer showed concern and interest throughout their cancer journey.

34% stated that their employer had been quick to respond and offer support when informed of a cancer diagnosis.

Line manager support

Only 27% said that their line manager provided support and understanding during their battle with cancer.

Support from HR and line managers was found to be lacking, particularly for younger employees.

These findings indicate a need for organisations to improve their training, preparedness and commitment to supporting employees facing a cancer diagnosis.



What employees want & feel

Cancer can have a life-changing and profound impact on employees. It's important to understand that with the right level of workplace support, workers can cope better with their health battles and return to work with more loyalty and resilience, greater compassion and empathy. They can become advocates.

59%

say they have a better appreciation of life having experienced working with cancer.

50%

have greater empathy and a better ability to relate to others

28%

feel they can cope better with stress than before.

However, our research indicated a number of negative indicators experienced during their cancer journey.

Feeling remote: A little over half of our research panel (52%) work remotely, either at home full-time, part-time with hybrid working or on the road.

Only a quarter of people who work from home felt supported by their employer, compared to 32% of hybrid workers and 33% of people who spend their working hours alongside their peers in a fixed place such as an office.

The silent C: The majority of employees (55%) tell their employer after their diagnosis, with only 11% waiting until they're undergoing treatment or when their treatment has finished.

Unsupported by peers: 45% believe their colleagues consider them a burden during their cancer journey and 35% don't feel supported by their colleagues.

35% of employees say they are left feeling isolated at work during their cancer experience. With the research pointing to employees who feel this way taking more time off work during their diagnosis, treatment and recovery.

Under pressure: Overall 33% of employee believe work became a 'good distraction' for them during their illness, but 22% admit that they felt more stressed juggling work while undergoing cancer care.

47% of employees who said they received support and advice from HR viewed work as a good distraction during their battle with cancer.

Stressed: Employees in supervisory and middle management roles felt the highest levels of stress (25%) compared to just 12% of those holding more junior, entry level positions.

Analysis

Our research highlighted that employer support – or lack thereof – directly correlates to employee stress levels. With 35% of employees who 'felt their employer could have done more to support them' also admitting to feeling stressed at work.

What's more, overwhelmingly our research showed that employees that felt supported by

their employer didn't feel pressured to return to work sooner than they needed.

Employees who are properly supported with assistance that reflects their needs can become committed advocates with a renewed resilience and strength when returning to the workplace.

How does working with cancer make you feel?

We asked our panel to describe the way they felt during their cancer journey at work. This is what they said.

Stressed

Supported

Vulnerable

Valued

Self-conscious

Strong

Frustrated

Brave

A burden

Resilient

Why employers are running the risk of losing their top talent

Lack of support contributes to talent loss

11% of employees surveyed said that they planned to leave their employer because of lack of support during their cancer journey.

Of those who intended to leave, 53% earned less than £3,000 pcm.

Loyal, experienced workers more likely to leave

Of the employees who planned to leave, 75% were aged 25-44 and 68% had worked with their current employer between 4-10 years. 49% were junior or middle management.

Analysis

The research highlights a concerning trend of talent loss in the UK workplace due to inadequate cancer support. This issue disproportionately affects lower-income earners and suggests that experienced and loyal employees are particularly vulnerable.

This age group represents individuals with valuable skills and knowledge, making their departure a significant loss and cost for businesses.



Make returning work

Returning to work after cancer treatment is unique to each individual. Some may feel eager to get back to routine and normality, while others may need more time to physically or emotionally recover

As part of our research, we looked at the experiences of employees who returned to the workplace after cancer.

Lack of support

Only 31% of respondents said they received support and advice from HR throughout, though this was lowest in the 18-24 age category.

28% said that their employer was providing 'enough' support (financial, emotional).

Under pressure for an early return:

14% of those surveyed felt pressured to return to work sooner than they should, this was most notable in the 25-44 age group.

Workplace advocates

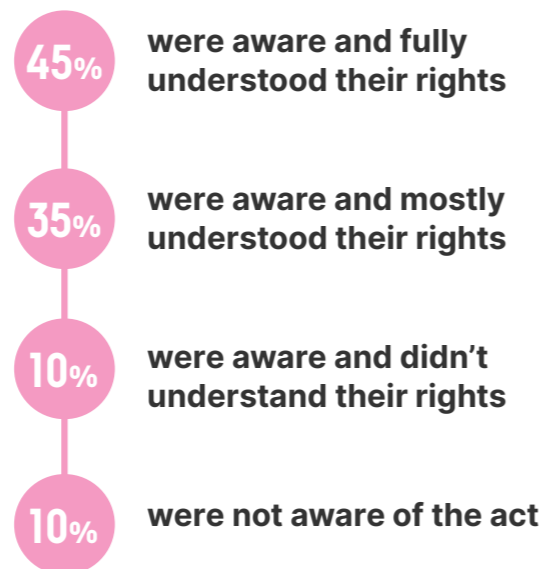
70% of those who were well supported by their employee benefits, returned to work feel like a 'changed person' with more empathy, better able to deal with stress and had a better appreciation for life.

Workplace adjustments and the Equality Act 2010

As part of the Equality Act 2010, employers are required to make reasonable adjustments for someone who has or has recovered from cancer.

Despite this, 73% said that workplace adjustments were not made upon return to work. This was most evident for women with 54% dissatisfied.

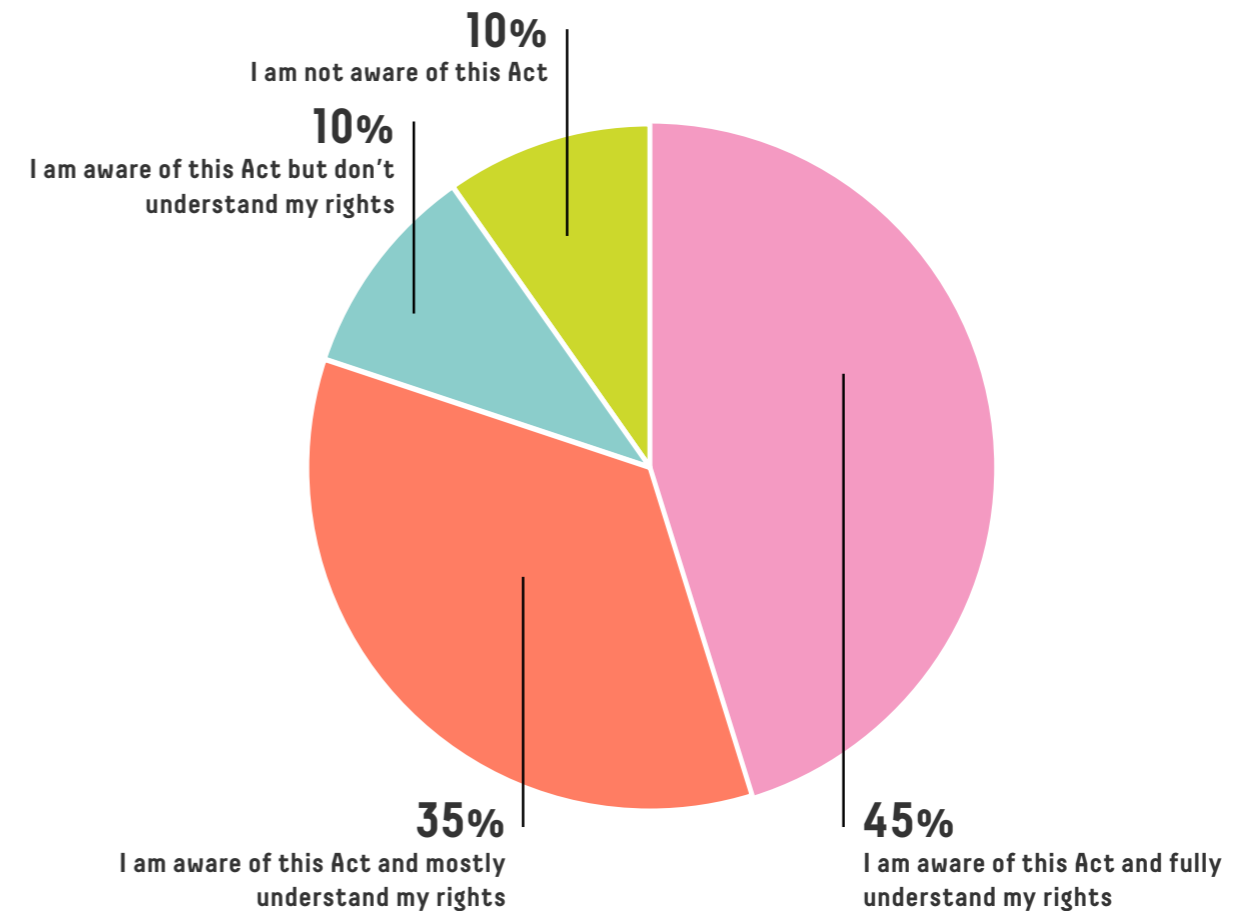
We explored the understanding of the Act further and it presented a mixed picture:



Of the respondents who were aware of their rights, 76% rated their employers response positively compared to 53% for those not aware of their rights under the Act.

Additionally, those who were not aware of the Equality Act 2010 stated that work was an added stress during their cancer journey (28%) and were less likely to feel supported and more likely to feel that their employer could do more.

Are you aware of the Equality act 2010, and do you understand your rights as a cancer sufferer under it?



What does the Equality Act mean for people with cancer?

The Equality Act considers a diagnosis of cancer as a disability. For workers with cancer the Act provides some important rights, such as the ability to negotiate reasonable changes to their work or workplace - if they need time off work for treatment and recovery or flexible working hours, for example. The Act also provides employees legal protection if they feel they're being treated unfairly because of their illness.

Analysis

Our study reveals a lack of support for cancer survivors returning to work in the UK, highlighting a crucial gap in employer practices.

Employers who consider the legislative requirements and make reasonable adjustments to ensure a smooth return to work plan can have a positive impact on the employee, their colleagues

and workplace culture.

With almost **2.5 million people** in the UK living with cancer, employers should consider how workers are supported during their return to work to ensure compliance with the Equality Act.

Mind the cancer communication gap

Early employer support with access to HR guidance, financial assistance and flexible work arrangements allow employees facing cancer to focus on their health and wellbeing. For many years, talk about cancer has been stigmatised and avoided.

This can lead to improved treatment outcomes, reduced stress, and a faster, healthier return to work, ultimately benefiting both the employee and the employer.

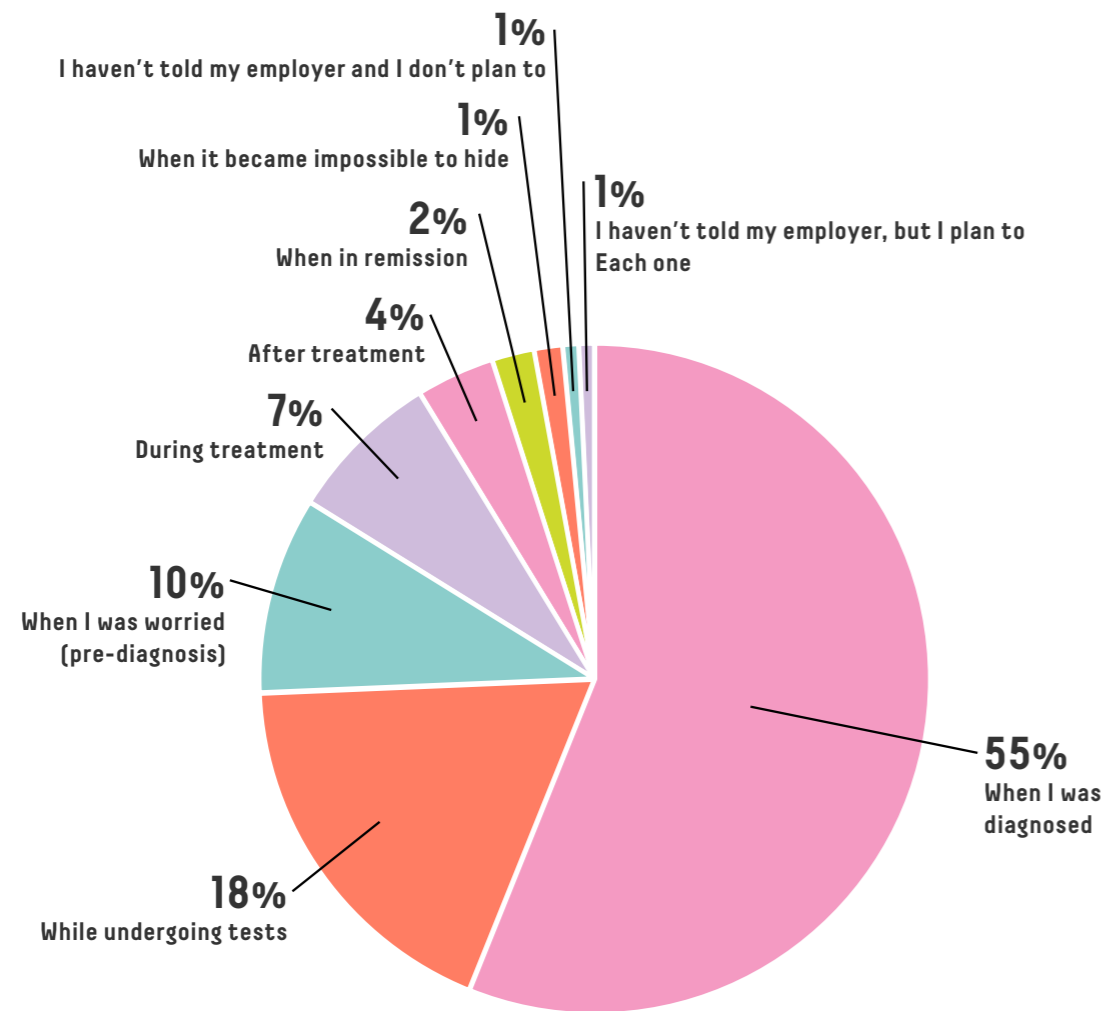
Removing stigmatisation and openly talking about cancer is crucial - but what is happening? We take a closer look.

When employees share their cancer news with their employer

The majority (55%) withheld the information until receiving a confirmed diagnosis.

An alarming 11% delayed disclosure even after starting or finishing treatment.

At what stage did you tell your employer about your cancer?



These findings suggest significant apprehension among employees, potentially stemming from:

- Fear of losing income due to reduced work hours or potential job loss.
- Anxiety about job security and the employer's reaction to their illness.

These concerns highlight the crucial role employers play in creating an open and supportive work environment. By fostering clear communication channels, employees can feel empowered to disclose their situation without fear of repercussions.

28% of employees shy away from talking to colleagues about their illness. With men in particular finding these conversations uncomfortable.

Analysis

The benefits of early employer support are clear:

Early employer support, encompassing access to HR guidance, financial assistance programmes, or a flexible approach to scheduling and leave, can significantly benefit employees with cancer:

Don't make cancer the 'silent C': Open and inclusive communication is important. A culture of understanding and empathy is crucial for employees to start conversations early, receive support and achieve better outcomes.

Reduced stress and anxiety: Knowing they have their employer's support can alleviate the mental burden associated with cancer.

Enhanced focus on treatment: Relieving financial worries allows employees to focus their energy on treatment and recovery.

Improved morale and engagement: Feeling valued and supported fosters a sense of security and can lead to improved work performance upon their return.

Retention of valuable employees: Investing in employee well-being fosters loyalty and strengthens the employer-employee relationship.

Around 4 in 10 UK cancer cases every year could be prevented, that's more than 135,000 every year.



Top Tips for employers

The risk that cancer will impact your business now and in the future is growing as cancer cases rise disproportionately in younger people.

Cancer is a complex, deeply personal journey and employers – as our research shows – are struggling to navigate the right level of support that their people need.

Using the insights from the research, here are Reframe Cancers' top tips for employers.

Create culture of open communication

Foster a supportive workplace where employees feel better able to share cancer news.

This can be achieved improving your training for line managers, ensuring senior buy-in and improve visibility around cancer topics and initiatives.

Encourage prevention and screening

Tackle cancer early by adopting a prevention focused strategy.

Highlight NHS screening programmes, provide resources on awareness and prevention and build prevention initiatives into your wellbeing strategy.

Flexible support

Offering flexible working is important throughout the cancer journey.

Taking the time to ask an employee undergoing cancer care what they need – not just at the start of the journey – but throughout will enable the support to be tailored to their individual needs.

Policies and benefits

Take a fresh look at your policies and employee benefits and ask yourself are they adequately supporting employees dealing with cancer?

Use the insights gained by our research to guide any changes and direct where improvements could be made.

Return to work and reasonable adjustments

Personalisation here is key – the right return to work for one employee might not be the same for another.

And make sure you understand your legal responsibilities and your employees do too so they feel empowered and supported.

Consider how employees feel

Our research proves that when employees feel supported, heard and understood they are more likely to consider work as a positive during their cancer journey.

Focus on the emotional and physical aspects of cancer to help employees through this difficult battle, to reduce impact of absence and save the business from talent loss.

Don't forget the carers

Over 800k people of working age are caring for a family member with cancer – so don't forget they need support too.

Experts in the workplace cancer support

Reframe Cancer supports the whole of the workforce with in-depth nurse-led assistance through the entire pathway from prevention to post treatment.

We expedite diagnosis and treatment to improve outcomes. We support patients, carers and colleagues impacted by cancer.

What we do

Our personalised, nurse-led service encompasses in-depth clinical, practical and emotional support, empowering people to manage their diagnosis.

Whole of workforce support

Covering the whole of your workforce, in all ways they may be impacted by cancer. We support employees even before a diagnosis, and assist carers who are supporting loved ones through cancer.

Cancer awareness & prevention

Increasing awareness of symptoms and healthy lifestyle choices, encourages earlier detection of cancer and reduces cancer risk. We help employers open the dialogue about cancer at work to improve employee health.

Speed up diagnosis and treatment

Our Cancer Nurse Specialist team's in-depth knowledge of both NHS and private healthcare creates a more efficient diagnosis and treatment journey. Advocating for patients, we proactively expedite referrals, appointments and test results.

Our support services

Our tailored short and long-term plans make our support affordable for any business.

Our plans can include:

- Access to Reframe's Cancer Information Hub – a searchable library of information for patients, line managers and HR teams.
- Scheduled calls when needed – with a Cancer Nurse Specialist or Cancer Support Manager.
- Dedicated support team assigned to each patient.
- Specialised support on managing and returning to work – for patients, and employers.
- Access to our Patient Portal 24/7 for online cancer support.

Contact us to discuss how we can support your business

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About our Research

The research was collected by OnePoll during December 2023. The research panel was made up of 500 UK employed adults aged 18 – 65+ who have personal experience of working with cancer.





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