

Cancer: an overview

A guide for managers and human resource professionals

Over 40% of new cancer cases in Australia occur in people of working age, so it is not unusual for a workplace to provide support to an employee affected by cancer. To help you create a cancer-friendly workplace, this fact sheet provides a brief introduction to what cancer is, the risk factors and current treatments.

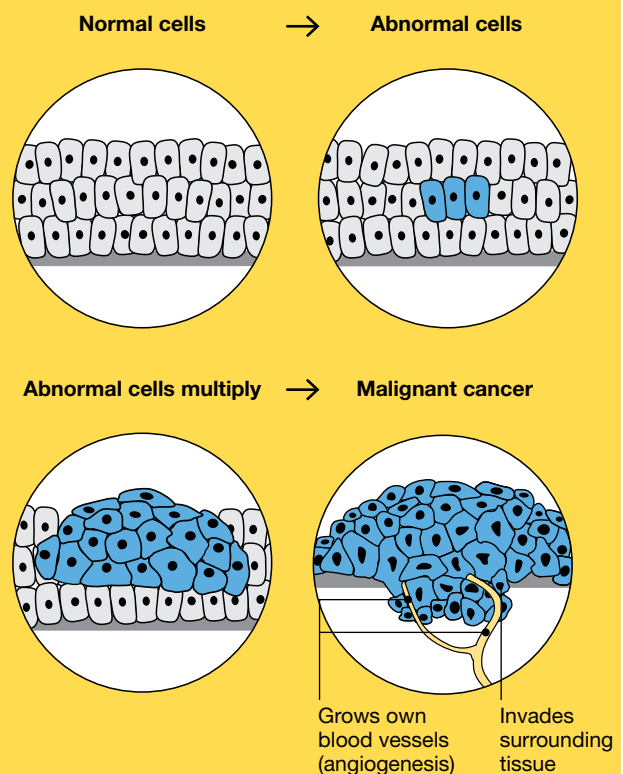
What is cancer?

Cancer is a disease of the cells. Cells are the body's basic building blocks – they make up tissues and organs. The body constantly makes new cells to help us grow, replace worn-out tissue and heal injuries.

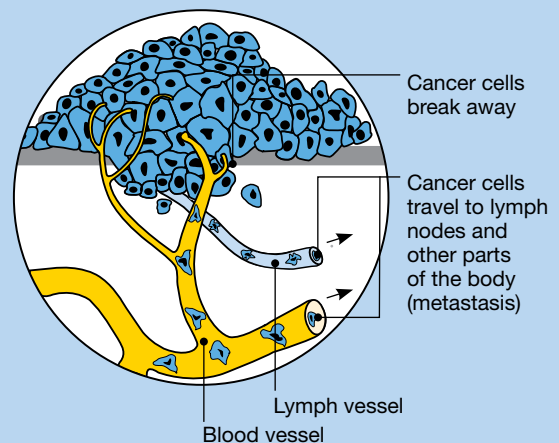
Normally, cells multiply and die in an orderly way, so that each new cell replaces one lost. Sometimes, however, cells become abnormal and keep growing. In solid tumours, the abnormal cells form a mass or lump called a tumour. In some cancers, such as leukaemia, the abnormal cells build up in the blood. Not all tumours are cancer. Benign tumours tend to grow slowly and usually don't move into other parts of the body or turn into cancer. Cancerous tumours, also known as malignant tumours, have the potential to spread. They may invade nearby tissue, destroying normal cells. The cancer cells can break away and travel through the bloodstream or lymph vessels to other parts of the body.

The cancer that first develops is called the primary cancer. It is considered localised cancer if it has not spread to other parts of the body. If the primary cancer cells grow and form another tumour at a new site, it is called a secondary cancer or metastasis. A metastasis keeps the name of the original cancer. For example, lung cancer that has spread to the bones is called metastatic lung cancer, even though the person may be experiencing symptoms caused by problems in the bones.

How cancer starts



How cancer spreads



Cancer: an overview

How common is cancer in Australia?

On average, one in two people will be diagnosed with cancer by the age of 85. In 2019, it's estimated that about 145,000 new cases of cancer will be diagnosed in Australia (excluding basal and squamous cell carcinoma of the skin).¹

The most commonly diagnosed types of cancer are breast, prostate, bowel (colorectal), melanoma and lung. Together, these five cancers account for about 60% of all cancers diagnosed in Australia.

Many cancers can be treated successfully, and about 70% of people diagnosed with cancer will still be alive five years after their treatment.

Cancer in the working population

In Australia, about 40% of people diagnosed with cancer are of working age (20–64).²

While most people newly diagnosed are 65 years or older (58%) and may be retired, their main carer may be a younger person in paid employment.

What are the risk factors?

The causes of many cancers are not fully understood. However, several risk factors may make some people more susceptible than others. These include:

- smoking tobacco/passive smoking
- exposure to UV radiation (e.g. from sunlight)
- drinking too much alcohol
- eating too much red and processed meat
- not eating enough fruit and vegetables
- being overweight
- lack of physical activity
- chronic infections, including the human papillomavirus (HPV) and hepatitis B or C
- family history and genetic susceptibility
- hormonal factors
- exposure to hazardous substances, chemicals, dust or radiation (e.g. asbestos, uranium, coal tar, wood dust, diesel exhaust, lead, benzene).

Having a risk factor doesn't necessarily mean that a person will get cancer. However, people who are aware of risk factors can make better lifestyle choices to reduce their risk.

How is cancer treated?

Treatment for cancer is often successful if the cancer is found early.

Most cancers are treated with surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy (also known as radiotherapy). Other treatments, such as hormone therapy, immunotherapy and targeted therapy, can also be used for some types of cancer.

Treatments may be used alone or in combination. Many people will have several cycles of treatment over a number of weeks or months.

Main types of cancer treatments

Surgery

An operation to remove cancerous tissue and some healthy tissue around it. It may be a major, invasive operation or a relatively minor procedure.

Drug therapies

Drugs are delivered into the bloodstream so the treatment can travel throughout the body. This is called systemic treatment, and includes:

- **Chemotherapy** – uses drugs known as cytotoxics to kill cancer cells or slow their growth. There are many different types of chemotherapy drugs. They are usually given through a vein (intravenously), but some may be given as tablets, cream or injections.
- **Hormone therapy** – uses synthetic hormones to block the effect of the body's natural hormones, which sometimes help cancers grow. The treatment may be given as tablets or injections.
- **Immunotherapy** – uses the body's own immune system to fight cancer cells. Immunotherapy drugs are usually administered into a vein (intravenously).
- **Targeted therapy** – attacks specific particles (molecules) within cells that allow cancer to grow and spread. It is generally given in tablet form (orally).

Radiation therapy (radiotherapy)

Uses a controlled dose of radiation, such as x-rays or gamma rays, to kill cancer cells or damage them so they cannot grow, multiply or spread. External beam radiation therapy or internal radiation therapy (brachytherapy) may be offered.

Cancer: an overview

Side effects of treatment

Many people who have treatment for cancer experience side effects. These vary depending on the treatments given. Side effects also vary from person to person, even among people having the same treatment.

Side effects can occur during or after treatment. They may be short term or last for a long time.

After a cancer diagnosis or treatment, some people are able to continue working during treatment but may need some time off for treatment and recovery. As treatments have improved, more people are able to keep working throughout treatment with the support of their employers. The work environment may help some people keep their lives as normal as possible. Cancer or the treatment side effects may mean that some people need to stop working.

Where to get help and information

- **Workplace fact sheets** – Other online fact sheets such as *Talking to your employee about cancer*, *Managing the effects of treatment* and *Creating cancer-friendly workplaces* are available on your local Cancer Council website.
- **Cancer Council 13 11 20** – Call for more information about cancer in the workplace. You can ask for free copies of our booklets on cancer treatments and side effects, or download digital copies from your local Cancer Council website.

Cancer Council websites

ACT.....	actcancer.org
NSW	cancercouncil.com.au
NT	nt.cancer.org.au
QLD	cancerqld.org.au
SA.....	cancersa.org.au
TAS	cancertas.org.au
VIC	cancervic.org.au
WA.....	cancerwa.asn.au
Australia.....	cancer.org.au

References

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Cancer in Australia 2019*, AIHW, Canberra, 2019. [Statistics do not include non-melanoma skin cancers.]
2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Cancer data in Australia; Australian Cancer Incidence and Mortality (ACIM) books: all cancers combined*, AIHW, Canberra, 2018.

Acknowledgements

This information was developed with help from a range of human resource, legal and health professionals, and people affected by cancer. We thank the reviewers of this fact sheet: Dr Fiona Day, Medical Oncologist, Calvary Mater Newcastle, NSW; John Boomsma, Consumer; Lydia Chin, HR Business Partner, Australian Red Cross, VIC; Emily Gibson, Social Worker, Mater Hospital Brisbane, QLD; Shai Ishaq, Head, Talent and Culture, Pureprofile, NSW; Nick Ruskin, Partner, K&L Gates, NSW; Andrew Smith, Occupational Therapist, Co-Founder and Director, Allied Education Group, VIC; Amy Wallis, Occupational Therapist, Co-Founder and Director, Allied Education Group, VIC; Kerryann White, Manager, People and Culture, Cancer Council SA.

Note to reader

This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and should not be seen as a substitute for medical, legal or financial advice. You should obtain independent advice relevant to your specific situation from appropriate professionals. Information on cancer, including the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of cancer, is constantly being updated and revised by medical professionals and the research community. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Cancer Council Australia and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided.

