

# Supporting an employee with breast cancer



**Breast cancer affects many New Zealanders. Ten women every day are diagnosed, so it's likely that someone in your workplace will be diagnosed with breast cancer, has had breast cancer in the past or is supporting someone with breast cancer. The right support from an employer or manager can make a difference and there are a number of ways you can do this while also meeting the needs of the workplace.**

We know that many people with breast cancer want to continue working during treatment and to remain connected with their workplace and their colleagues. It's important to know that breast cancer treatment can be complex, affecting employees in different ways, sometimes over a long period of time. Being a supportive employer can help reduce your employee's anxiety and give them the confidence to cope with breast cancer at work. In this factsheet you will find guidance on how to support employees.

## Initial support

Communication is key when supporting an employee. It's not uncommon to feel surprised or unprepared when first hearing the news that an employee has cancer. The most important thing is to listen and to be open to cues around how best to support them. Initial support could include:

- An agreement around sick leave or time off work. Explore and discuss this with your employee what workplace support and benefits they may be entitled to. You may need to check in with HR around this.
- An understanding of what your employee wants their colleagues to know. Discuss what they feel comfortable sharing, and what they want to remain private and confidential. An offer to tell colleagues on their behalf can be welcome.
- A plan to cover urgent or imminent work
- Once your employee knows what treatment they are having and how this will impact on their day-to-day work, set up a meeting to discuss what ongoing leave is required and what support they need to continue working.

Most managers will need to take some time to prepare. It can be useful to learn a little about breast cancer and likely treatment and any cultural support that may be required. You will also want to familiarise yourself with your obligations as an employer and any relevant workplace policies; including sick leave and other entitlements.

## Ongoing support

### Contacting your employee

Develop a schedule of times to check in, to see how your employee is doing. Agree on clear communication channels; when do they want you to contact them and how? It is often very important for employees to remain connected to the workplace, so keep them up to date with what's happening and any important changes. Encourage them to let you know if they are struggling and discuss different options for support. Offer to set up a meeting between your employee and HR if they are able to provide additional support.

## Supporting new ways of working

Some employees will be clear that they can continue working through treatment, others will take time off or want to discuss flexible work arrangements or a gradual return to work. There are a number of ways you can support this:

- Flexible working arrangements, such as reduced hours or working from home.
- Adjusting workload.
- Make simple changes in the office, such as providing a carpark or a place in the office to rest during a break.
- Arrange access to the Employee Assistance Programme if they would like to speak to a counsellor.
- Keep colleagues up to date (if agreed upon by the employee). Talk to them about breast cancer, likely treatment and ways to support.
- Some people with breast cancer will be very worried about getting sick in the office. Encourage other employees to maintain good, healthy work practices, including working from home when they are sick.

## Returning to work

Coming back to the workplace after being away for an extended period can be daunting and a gradual return to work plan may be necessary. Flexibility is vital; be aware that the plan may need to be reviewed to accommodate unforeseen circumstances. Your employee will know best what they feel able to do and at what stage.

The impact of a breast cancer diagnosis and treatment, even after treatment ends, is significant, both psychologically and physically. It can take many months to recover following treatment for breast cancer and for some women treatment may be ongoing, with regular hospital follow-up. Continue to check in with your employee to see how they are doing and if they need support long-term. Many other people will thrive following a breast cancer diagnosis and treatment, so take your cue from your employee.

## Looking after yourself

Meeting the health needs of others can be challenging. If you need support yourself, remember your own manager, HR and your Employee Assistance Programme can be great sources of information and support.

Breast Cancer Foundation NZ is also a good source of information and support around breast cancer in the workplace. **You can visit our website [breastcancerfoundation.org.nz](https://www.breastcancerfoundation.org.nz) or contact our specialist breast nurses on 0800 226 8773 or at [breastnurse@bcf.org.nz](mailto:breastnurse@bcf.org.nz).**