

Watch and wait

A quick guide for employers

This guide explains 'watch and wait' for people with blood cancer and suggests ways that line managers, HR teams and occupational health professionals can support employees who are affected by it.

What is watch and wait?

While many types of cancer need to be treated immediately, not everyone with blood cancer (such as leukaemia or lymphoma) or a related blood condition needs treatment straight away.

'Watch and wait' is a way of monitoring these people with regular check-ups and blood tests until they need treatment.

It's only recommended for people with slow-developing (chronic) blood cancers or related long-term conditions, with few or no symptoms.

Our website has more information about watch and wait, which may be helpful for both employers and employees.

Go to bloodwise.org.uk/watchandwait

Around 27,000 people – 13% of all blood cancer patients – are currently monitored in this way in the UK. Research shows that people on watch and wait aren't any more at risk of their condition getting worse than people receiving treatment.

The majority of people on watch and wait continue to work during this monitoring period and as they start treatment, and there are a number of things you can keep in mind to help you support these employees in the workplace.

How can watch and wait affect people?

Emotional and psychological impact

Learning that you have a form of blood cancer is an extremely personal thing to go through. It's not unusual for people who have been diagnosed with blood cancer to experience levels of stress, anxiety and depression that have a negative impact on their quality of life.

For people on watch and wait, who aren't receiving treatment, continuing life 'as normal' can be a daily struggle, with many experiencing high levels of anxiety between their check-ups.

Physical effects

In addition to the psychological impact of watch and wait, a large number of people will also experience extreme tiredness (fatigue). Some people on watch and wait may need to reduce or change their working hours, or take periods of absence to cope with this.

A large number of people on watch and wait will also have weakened immune systems as a result of a blood cancer or condition that's affecting their white blood cell count. This may mean that they take longer to recover from illnesses than you might expect of someone with a healthy immune system (the body's defence system against infection) – though everyone will be different.

How to support your employee

It's important not to make assumptions about their circumstances, capabilities or any adjustments you may need to make in the workplace. Where possible, these decisions should be made in partnership with your employee – and, where relevant, on the advice of their specialist doctor.

Talking about blood cancer

If one of your employees is placed on watch and wait for a blood cancer or related condition, simple adjustments can make a big difference to helping them stay in work while remaining comfortable and achieving their best.

You may both benefit from having an open discussion about any adjustments that need to be made to help your employee continue to deliver a high quality of work.

Creating an ongoing dialogue with your employee will help you respond to their needs (as these might change), but you should judge the right level of communication for each individual, as everyone is different.

Below are some tips that might help you and your employee discuss the ways in which watch and wait is affecting them.

- › Choose somewhere where you won't be interrupted to have this conversation.
- › Reassure your employee that anything they share will be kept confidential.
- › Let them set the pace.
- › Offer verbal cues or ask gentle questions to show you are listening.
- › Keep the conversation about them and not you – it's important to recognise that no two experiences will be the same.
- › Give them plenty of time to compose themselves if they become upset and be prepared to postpone if they become too distressed to continue.

Your employee's rights

In England, Scotland and Wales, employees with cancer are protected from discrimination at work under the Equality Act 2010. For the purposes of the Act, anyone with cancer is considered to meet the definition of disability from the day they are diagnosed. This is true even if they appear well and are not yet receiving treatment. As an employer, you should therefore make reasonable adjustments to make sure any workers with blood cancer (including contract workers, trainees, apprentices and business partners) aren't seriously disadvantaged when doing their jobs.

In addition, you must not treat any employee less favourably because of a cancer diagnosis under any circumstances, or treat them less favourably because of a reason arising from their cancer diagnosis (such as the need to work reduced hours) unless such treatment is justified.

It's possible that you may see a change in your employee's performance or conduct after diagnosis or during any monitoring period. If so, be sure to give your employee the opportunity to talk through possible reasons for the change before considering any further action (including disciplinary or punitive action); employees are protected under the Equality Act for situations where their employer knew, or should have known, about their cancer diagnosis.

Employees in Northern Ireland are protected by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Disability Discrimination Order 2006.

You can find more information about your legal obligations as an employer at: [gov.uk/reasonable-adjustments-for-disabled-workers](https://www.gov.uk/reasonable-adjustments-for-disabled-workers)

Making reasonable adjustments

Most working people on watch and wait will need time off work to go for blood tests and to attend hospital or GP appointments, so doctors can monitor their condition. The length of time between these appointments will depend on each patient's individual circumstances, but most people will see their doctor once every few months. Ideally, employees should not be required to take annual leave for appointments relating to their condition, but you should discuss all the options in accordance with your absence management policy.

Other small adjustments to help your employee manage their fatigue, and other symptoms or side effects, could include:

- › adjustments to their working environment,
- › reduced working hours, flexible working or job-sharing,
- › more breaks,
- › specialist equipment,
- › limiting anything that's physically demanding or likely to cause tiredness,
- › gradual return to work following absence due to sickness,
- › adjusting their performance targets, and
- › redistributing their workload.

Follow-up

While some people on watch and wait will eventually need treatment if their condition gets worse, others may never need it. It's therefore important to make sure that any arrangements for your employees remain appropriate if things change.

You may want to schedule quarterly review sessions, or more informal chats following your employee's check-ups. Speak to your employee to see if this works for them, too.

Supporting carers

You may have an employee who is supporting or caring for someone on watch and wait.

Carers are entitled to a reasonable amount of (paid or unpaid) time off work to deal with emergencies involving someone who is dependent on them (such as their spouse, partner, child, grandparent or parent), under the Employments Rights Act 1996. In the context of watch and wait, this might include taking a spouse, partner or close family member to the GP or hospital due to an infection or rapid decline in health, for example.

Anyone who has worked for you for 26 weeks or more is also entitled to request flexible working to help them care for their loved one. Flexible working can include different working hours or days, or working from home for some or all of that time. If an employee applies for flexible working, you're obliged to respond in a 'reasonable manner', which includes:

- › assessing the advantages and disadvantages of their application,
- › organising a meeting to discuss their application, and
- › providing an appeals process if you don't meet their request.

You can also start flexible working for a trial period, which gives both you and your employee the option of returning back to the original contract at a later date.

Alternatively, you can suggest another possible solution if you do not accept their original flexible working request. This not only benefits your employee, but also helps to show that you've considered their circumstances in a reasonable manner.

Telling colleagues

Your employee may choose to tell other members of staff about their diagnosis, or they may prefer to keep it confidential. This is their choice to make, but there are things you can do to support your employee in making their decision.

For example, if they would like others to know about their condition, it's important to discuss how they would like to share the news. Some individuals may choose to tell colleagues themselves, while others may prefer for another colleague to share the news on their behalf.

If the latter, it's important to understand exactly what information your employee would like to be shared, how they would like it communicated and with whom. You should also ask them whether they would like to be present at the time.

Where to get advice and support as an employer

Getting financial advice

You may wish to speak to a financial advisor to discuss the options available to your organisation should one of your employees be diagnosed with blood cancer.

There are several types of insurance policy, such as critical illness cover and long-term income protection, that may be of benefit to organisations and their employees. Some cancers and related conditions may not be covered, so it's important to check exactly what's included before taking out a policy.

Arranging external support

Occupational health advisors and employee assistance programmes can provide further advice to help you support any employees affected by watch and wait, and strike a balance that works for everyone.

Working towards wellbeing and **Working with cancer** are two organisations that help people with chronic conditions to either stay at work, or go back to work when they're ready. Both provide training for employers, but are also useful resources for employees.

Visit workingtowardswellbeing.com and workingwithcancer.co.uk for more.

If you don't have a dedicated occupational health department, you can contact your local occupational health specialist to find out what you can do to support your employee – you can find out who the best person to contact is by visiting the website shown below.

You can access free, professional occupational health guidance through **Fit for work**. Go to fitforwork.org/employer for more information and support.

Finding out more

We offer patient information on many blood cancer types and topics, online and in free printed booklets. They cover everything from symptoms and diagnosis through to treatment and living with a blood cancer or related condition.



For more information about watch and wait or specific conditions, go to bloodwise.org.uk/info-support



We also have an online community you may like to join: bloodwise.org.uk/bloodwise-community



Or you can call our Support Line on **0808 2080 888** (Mon–Fri 10am–4pm). This is a freephone number.



See our website for more details of cancer information specialists and support groups: bloodwise.org.uk/info-support/living-with

About Bloodwise

We're the UK's specialist blood cancer charity.

We've been working to beat blood cancer since 1960.

We fund world-class research; provide practical and emotional support to patients and their loved ones; and raise awareness of blood cancer.

We'd like to thank Dr Sajir Mohamedbhai, Dr Sally Moore and Dr Kevin Boyd for their help and support in developing the content and checking for clinical accuracy. A list of references used in this fact sheet is available on request, please email information@bloodwise.org.uk

Our fact sheets contain general information. Every person is different, but you can use this information to inform your approach to meeting your employee's needs.

Disclaimer

Bloodwise can't accept any loss or damage resulting from any inaccuracy in this information, or from external information that we link to. We make every effort to make sure that the information in this fact sheet is accurate, but it is not a substitute for legal advice. If you need more details on employee rights, or legal advice, please contact a solicitor.

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