
Returning to Work After Cancer Treatment

You may have been able to take time off work while getting treatment. And now you might be thinking about going back to work after your treatment is finished. You might find that going back to work helps you keep your sense of who you are and how you fit in. It might help even boost your self-esteem, not to mention your income.

Your job may remind you that you have a life apart from cancer – you are a valued employee, a great boss, or a trusted co-worker. You'll also have regular contact with others when you go back to work. Sometimes cancer can make you feel very isolated and lonely, and being around people can be a great comfort.

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If you are thinking of going back to work, make sure you are medically cleared first by your health care provider. You may also want to talk with your employer about possible options, like flex-time, job sharing, working from home (telecommuting) or other options that may help ease you back into the demands of your job.

For some people the transition to working full-time may be easy, but for others it may take some adjustment. You may find that you tire easily or have trouble focusing at first. Try to be patient and take care of yourself as you go back to your “normal” life.

Telling co-workers about your cancer treatment

How open you are with your co-workers about your cancer and health after cancer treatment is a personal decision. Based on your relationship with your co-workers, you can decide if you want to share anything, and how much you would like to share. Try not to feel pressured to share or explain things. Only you can decide what works best for you and your situation.

You may find that your co-workers have different reactions to you when you go back to work. Those who know what you've been going through may react to your cancer diagnosis and absences with understanding and offers to help. Others may feel uncomfortable around you. Some people may be reminded of a loved one's time with cancer. Some co-workers may resent that they had to take on extra duties on days when you were absent. Others may ask intrusive questions about your health or why you've been gone, or they might even avoid you.

It also helps to think ahead about how you will handle other people's reactions, and have a plan for what and how much you want to share. It might help you to read [Telling Others About Your Cancer](#)¹.

Legal protections for working people with cancer

You have the same rights as anyone else in the workplace and should be given equal opportunities, regardless of whether or not you tell people at work about your cancer. Hiring, promotion, and how you are treated in the workplace should depend entirely on your abilities and qualifications. As long as you are able to fulfill your job duties, you can't legally be fired for being sick. You also shouldn't have to accept a position you never would have considered before your illness.

Many people with job problems related to cancer are protected by federal laws like the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Some people also benefit from the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) This law lets many people with serious illnesses take reasonable unpaid leave to get medical care or manage their symptoms. Talk to someone in your human resources department or another workplace expert to find out what your options are.

For some people, it may take some period of adjustment and some extra help to get back to their regular work schedule. If you try to go back to a full-time schedule before you're ready, your work may suffer. Talk with your health care provider about the kind of work you do and any problems you are having as you decide how to re-enter the workforce. You may need to start with shorter workdays or work fewer days a week until you see how things go. You may find that the way you work has changed, or you need something more to help you do your job.

Reasonable accommodations at work

Employers are not required to lower standards to accommodate an employee, nor must they provide personal-use items like glasses or hearing aids. But an employer must accommodate a qualified applicant or employee with a disability unless the employer can show it would be an undue hardship to do so. Examples of reasonable accommodations for cancer patients might include, but are not limited to:

- Providing or modifying equipment or devices
- Restructuring a job
- Offering part-time or modified work schedules, such as permission to work from home if possible.
- Reassigning an employee to a vacant position or assigning the employee different tasks if the employee is no longer able to do their current job.
- Adjusting or modifying tests, training materials, or policies
- Making the workplace readily accessible to and usable by people with disabilities

A vocational rehabilitation counselor can help with some of your job-related legal questions, but you might also want to look into laws that affect you and how you can deal with any problems that might come up. Some cancer treatment centers offer referrals to vocational rehab counselors, so ask your health care team. Your health care team may also have tools or people that can help you.

To find out more about job accommodations and employment of people with limitations, contact the Job Accommodation Network at 1-800-526-7234 or visit their website, <http://askjan.org/>. They can talk with you about the requirements of the ADA or the Rehabilitation Act, whichever applies to your case.

Discrimination against people with cancer at work

Even though the public's understanding of cancer is getting better, sometimes prejudices and fears are still found in the workplace. Even after your cancer treatment has ended, you may face work and workplace discrimination issues. Tell your Human Resources Department about any workplace discrimination issues you might be facing. If your workplace has a union, its officials can be good sources of information about illnesses and the workplace.

Keep notes of your contacts with office personnel, including the names of the people you spoke with, the date and place you spoke, and the information you received. It's also a good idea to keep copies of your job performance evaluations and any other

written information about your work. These can be very helpful if problems come up later.

If you want to file a discrimination complaint

If you think you have been discriminated against at work on the basis of disability, you can file a complaint with the United States [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission \(EEOC²\)](#). You must do this within 180 days of the time you think the discrimination occurred (although some states or local laws allow you to take up to 300 days).

Get more help and information

If you would like to read more about asking for help as you go back to work, see the [Americans With Disabilities Act³](#). If you need extra time off as you go back to work, you may also want to read the [Family and Medical Leave Act \(FMLA\)⁴](#). This information explains more about federal laws that can help many people with medical problems.

If you collected Social Security disability benefits during cancer treatment and recovery, you might want to try [Social Security's Ticket to Work Program⁵](#). This free program offers support as you try to go back to work, and allows you to continue to receive disability benefits for a trial period while working. You can also call them at 1-866-968-7842.

Along with the federal laws, some states also have laws about employing people with various illnesses, including cancer. These state laws may help you in other ways. You can find out more from your state's Department of Labor. Visit the [US Department of Labor⁶](#) website at to find your state.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/telling-others-about-your-cancer.html
2. www.eeoc.gov/
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/financial-insurance-matters/health-insurance-laws/americans-with-disabilities-act.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/financial-insurance-matters/health-insurance-laws/family-and-medical-leave-act.html
5. choosework.ssa.gov/about/how-it-works/index.html

6. www.dol.gov/whd/contacts/state_of.htm
7. askjan.org/
8. www.ada.gov/
9. www.eeoc.gov/
10. www.cancerlegalresources.org/
11. www.cancerandcareers.org/
12. www.survivorshipatoz.org/
13. pressroom.cancer.org/

Additional resources

Along with the American Cancer Society, other sources of information and support include:

Job Accommodation Network Toll-free number: 1-800-526-7234 TTY: 1-877-781-9403 Website: <http://askjan.org/>⁷

This free service from the US Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy has information about job accommodations for people with limitations, accommodation ideas, and tips on how to approach employers and ask for accommodations

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Technical Assistance Toll-free number: 1-800-514-0301 TTY: 1-800-514-0383 Website: www.ada.gov⁸

For general information about the ADA, answers to specific questions, free ADA materials, or information about filing a complaint

US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) Toll-free number: 1-800-669-4000 TTY: 1-800-669-6820 Website: www.eeoc.gov⁹

Offers information on your rights and the laws that apply to your state, including filing charges for discrimination. Also has special information for people with cancer, “Questions and Answers About Cancer in the Workplace and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA),” which can be found on the EEOC website at www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/cancer.cfm

Cancer Legal Resource Center (CLRC) Toll-free number: 1-866-843-2572 TTY: 213-736-8310 Website: www.cancerlegalresources.org¹⁰

Offers free, confidential information and resources on cancer-related legal issues to cancer survivors, their families, friends, employers, and others coping with cancer.

Cancer and Careers Website: www.cancerandcareers.org¹¹

For information on dealing with the potential impact cancer may have on your career, creating an action plan, sharing your diagnosis with employers and co-workers, legal issues, and insurance issues

Survivorship A to Z, Inc. Website: www.survivorshipatoz.org/cancer¹²

Has financial, legal, and practical information for people facing a cancer diagnosis

References

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United States Department of Labor (DOL): Office of Disability Employment Policy. *Employment laws: Disability & discrimination*. 2010. Accessed at <https://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/laws.htm> on February 28, 2019.

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