

Cancer and Work

Cancer will affect at least one in three Americans during their lifetimes. While medical care is essential for people with cancer, it is often just as important for them to maintain as normal a life as possible to speed recovery. For many, this means going to work and participating in the same activities as they did prior to diagnosis.

Talking to Your Employer

When, how, and what you tell your employer about your cancer diagnosis and treatment is a personal decision. If you do decide to share details with your employer or supervisor, be prepared to discuss how your treatment will affect you in your job and what sort of accommodations, including time off, you may need. Having the answers to the following questions (which you can cover with your doctor ahead of time) may help you have a productive conversation.

- How will your treatment and recovery affect your ability to do your job?
- How much time will you need to take off?
- Will you be able to continue to do your job as well as you did before you were diagnosed with cancer?
- When can you expect to return to your “before cancer” work status?

Although your employer will most likely support you during your treatment, it is a good idea to keep a record of any talks you conduct with your manager and people in the human resources or benefits offices. Also keep copies of performance reviews, memos, and letters regarding your employment and requests

for benefits such as disability. This sort of documentation will help you if you ever need to take action in the future.

Job Challenges Faced by Cancer Survivors

While most employers treat cancer survivors fairly and legally, some—due either to outdated personnel policies or an uninformed or misguided supervisor—erect unnecessary and sometimes illegal barriers to survivors’ job opportunities. People who have faced cancer can encounter problems such as dismissal, failure to be hired, demotion, denial of promotion, denial of benefits, undesirable transfer, and hostility by coworkers.

Cancer survivors are at times treated unfairly because some people still believe myths about cancer that lead them to make wrong assumptions about cancer survivors’ ability to work. These myths include:

- that cancer is a death sentence. In reality, more than 60 percent of individuals diagnosed today will live through and beyond cancer.
- that a cancer diagnosis or cancer history will cause group insurance premiums to

increase. In reality, one person's illness is unlikely to affect group insurance costs dramatically unless the policy covers only a small number of workers.

- that cancer survivors are unproductive workers. In reality, studies show that most adult survivors return to work after their diagnoses and have productivity rates similar to those of other workers.

Employers as well as fellow employees may believe myths and may stigmatize workers with cancer. The keys to changing these harmful beliefs are education and communication.

Protecting Your Rights

Cancer patients have many legal protections in the workplace. Under federal law and many state laws, for example, an employer cannot treat you differently from other workers in job-related activities because of your cancer history as long as you are qualified for the job. And employers also must provide "reasonable accommodations," such as a change in work hours or duties, to help you do your job during or after cancer treatment.

Provisions in the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 require that businesses with 50 or more employees allow them up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave during any 12-month period for certain circumstances, including a serious illness. This could be an important option for you if your treatment prevents you from

working. If you take this leave, your employer must continue to provide benefits—including health insurance—while you are away, and must place you in the same or an equivalent position when you return.

While these laws discourage job discrimination, they can't prevent it. If you face discrimination, you must decide how to take action. Your first step should be to attempt a reasonable settlement with your employer. This may take several forms. But if you don't get the fair treatment you deserve, the remedy of last resort may be to consult an attorney—which is a decision that should be considered very carefully.

Resources

NATIONAL COALITION FOR CANCER SURVIVORSHIP

"Working It Out: Your Employment Rights as a Cancer Survivor"

www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/publications/employment.pdf

"Coping With Your Employer"

www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/special-topics/caregiving/employer.html

"Employment"

www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/employment.html

"Cancer Survival Toolbox"

www.canceradvocacy.org/toolbox

Visit the following section: *Living Beyond Cancer*.

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