



Module Tools - Act

living with
cancer

Table of Contents

1. Tips for Managing Work After a Cancer Diagnosis
2. Tips for Working While in Treatment
3. Tips for Returning to Work



Tips for Managing Work After a Cancer Diagnosis

living with cancer

It's normal to be very confused and have many questions when you're first diagnosed with cancer. Some of those questions will be about what to do at work. You may wonder about how to tell your boss or even whether you want people at work to know. Only you can make the decisions that are right for you, but it's important to understand that it's hard for people to comfort and support you if they don't know what's going on.

To Share or Not to Share the News

You have to tell your employer that you have cancer if it's going to affect your ability to do your job. If it's not, you have no legal obligation to share the news. But know that if you don't tell, people will likely talk about what they think is happening in your life. The effort to keep your illness a secret can be very stressful, and you may deprive yourself of possible support at work.

Deciding to tell people at work about a cancer diagnosis is a personal decision that will depend on your ability to do your job, your relationship with your co-workers, your feelings about privacy and your previous experience with illness in the workplace (for example, how your co-workers reacted to someone else's news of a serious illness).

It is against the law to discriminate against someone who has cancer or a physical disability. You can protect yourself from employment discrimination by learning about your rights in the workplace. For more information on your rights in the workplace, contact the [BC Human Rights Clinic](#).

Where to Start

A good place to start is with someone in the human resources department. They should have the skills and tools to guide you through the process and be able to explain their policies, including information about benefits and other available assistance. They should also be able to let you know what your employer's responsibilities are to you and can help you talk to your supervisor or manager.

Who to Tell

If you're going to be off work for long periods of time or your ability to do your job will be affected, you need to tell your employer. You don't need to disclose any details if you don't feel comfortable doing so. You only need to explain how it will affect your performance at work. Employers are often very supportive.

If you're a manager, you will probably need to explain the situation to your employees because it will affect daily operations in the workplace.





When to Tell

Sometimes it's a good idea to wait until your treatment has been planned. That way, you can answer questions about when and for how long you think you'll be off work. However, giving your employer as much notice as possible to arrange coverage during your absence shows commitment to your job and consideration for your co-workers.

How Much to Tell

It's often hard to decide what information to share with your co-workers. The least personal aspects of a cancer diagnosis to share with co-workers are how your work and their work will be affected by your illness. A great place to start is to tell people at work about the diagnosis and expected course of treatment, how much time off will be needed and how work will be handled in your absence. If you have a closer relationship with certain co-workers, it can also be helpful to let them know that your mood, behaviour or ability to do your work may be affected and that they may need to help you out. You can also consider preparing people for possible changes in your appearance as your treatment progresses.

Some people find comfort and support in talking about their cancer diagnosis with their co-workers. Others prefer to focus on their normal daily tasks rather than on the cancer. Whichever way works for you, try to communicate your wishes clearly so that your co-workers and employer know how best to support you. Do not be afraid to ask for support. Social workers, employee assistance programs and employers can all help with many issues and provide support.

Planning Ahead

A cancer diagnosis and treatment may bring financial stress. You may need to spend more money on childcare, help around the house, medicines and therapies not covered by provincial or private health insurance, nutritional supplements, or travel and accommodation for treatment — all at a time when your income may be significantly reduced. To start:

- Obtain documentation that explains what coverage is included and not included in your health plan, and become familiar with how to submit claims and who to call when you have questions.
- Check into any additional benefits you may be eligible for through any private life or health insurance you have purchased, your credit card benefits or any associations you belong to.



Short-term Disability or Long-term Disability

Some employers or private health plans provide partial salary continuance for a specific time period. Ask the following questions:

- Does my employer offer any salary continuance or the option of using sick days before disability benefits payments begin? (Often there is a waiting period before benefits begin, and some companies may bridge the gap during this waiting period.)
- When should I expect my payments?
- How will my payments be received? (cheque or direct deposit)
- How will disability benefits payments be calculated? Are Employment Insurance (EI) or Canadian Pension Plan (CPP) contributions, or provincial or federal tax deducted from the disability benefits payments?
- What services are provided through the disability benefits provider? (Depending on the situation, many providers may pay for psychologist's fees, for example.)
- What can I expect in terms of communication with the disability benefits provider and my employer?

You can also ask the psychosocial professionals at your cancer centre about financial assistance programs (Employment Insurance Benefits) and government benefits (Canada Pension Plan Disability Benefits), as well as other organizations that can help out with transportation and accommodation.

The Canadian Cancer Society offers a variety of services to support individuals and their caregivers going through a cancer experience. Please visit cancer.ca or call our Cancer Information Service for more information - 1-888-939-3333 or email info@cis.cancer.ca Ask about specific services available in your community to assist you during this time in your life.

Sources: [BC Cancer Agency](#), [Canadian Cancer Society](#)

Tips for Working While in Treatment

living with cancer

One of the many decisions you will have to make is whether to keep working or whether to take a leave while undergoing treatment. You're not alone if you find this decision very hard. For some people, giving up work leads to serious money worries or self-esteem challenges. For others, time away from work can be a relief. You'll need to talk to your employer, healthcare team, family and friends. Your decision will depend on the type of treatment you're receiving, the stage of your cancer, your overall health and the kind of work that you do.

Talk to Your Employer About Your Options

If you're working while receiving treatment for cancer, be sure to discuss your working arrangements with your employer. Even if you don't need to take time off work, it can be helpful to know what your options are. It may be possible to organize modified duties or a flexible schedule that will work around your needs. Some examples of working arrangements that employers could look into would be: giving extra days off, working part-time, working from home or placing a desk closer to the office bathroom.

If you decide to take a leave from work while you have treatment for cancer, give your employer as much notice as possible. (They will need to come up with a plan to cover your absence.) Be open, honest and realistic about your expectations of the employer. Make sure you understand what they expect of you. This can help minimize stress as your treatment continues.

Helpful Tips if You Keep Working

- Plan your chemotherapy treatments late in the day or right before the weekend to allow yourself time to recover, if possible.
- Explore work options like working from home some days. This can help reduce fatigue and allow you to take care of yourself more easily.
- Getting help at home can mean more energy for work. Certain daily chores could be divided among friends and family members who have offered to help.
- Unless there is a reason not to, let your co-workers know about your situation. You might find they are a great source of support. They may even be able to help you come up with better ways to manage your work during this time.
- Keep your supervisor up to date on how well your schedule or other work-related changes are working for you.



Plan for Fatigue

Chronic fatigue is a major side effect of cancer treatment. Chronic fatigue is different than simply being tired. It can be excessive and constant, may not get better with rest, may persist over time and can interfere with the activities of daily living. Along with symptoms that you might expect such as a lack of energy and trouble getting up in the morning, you may have trouble sleeping, muscle pain, difficulty concentrating or thinking clearly. You may be out of breath after doing small tasks, feel anxious or depressed or lose interest in things you usually enjoy.

Your body is using a lot of energy while you're being treated. Everyone's experience is different, but many people treated for cancer find that they must prioritize their activities in order to make sure they do what is most important to them.

Top 10 Energy-Saving Tips

1. Take time for yourself and your own needs.
2. Eat a well-balanced diet and drink plenty of fluids.
3. Be as physically active as you can.
4. Learn to manage your stress.
5. When you are active, take frequent short rest breaks.
6. Don't overload your day. Reassess and reprioritize what you do. This can mean talking to your employer or supervisor about adjusting your job responsibilities or your hours of work or both.
7. Learn to delegate tasks to others both at home and work. Don't be afraid to ask for help.
8. Look for new ways of doing things so they are less physically or mentally taxing.
9. Plan your day to take advantage of when you have the most energy.
10. Share your feelings with your family members, friends or caregivers, or join a support group.



The 4 Ps: Plan, Prioritize, Pace and Position

Plan your day the night before. Focus on what is most important and eliminate less important activities. Plan your day around when you usually have the most energy and try to be efficient in completing your tasks.

Prioritize the most important to least important tasks for the day and concentrate on getting only the most important tasks completed. Ask others for help in completing your tasks.

Pace yourself and balance out your activities with rest. Take advantage of times when you have more energy to do activities that require more effort.

Position yourself physically based on the instructions given to you by your medical team. If you have had surgery, ask your friends and family to help you to start walking and moving again as soon as possible.

For More Information

The Canadian Cancer Society offers a variety of services to support individuals and their caregivers going through a cancer experience. Please visit cancer.ca or call our Cancer Information Service for more information - 1-888-939-3333 or email info@cis.cancer.ca. Ask about specific services available in your community to assist you during this time in your life.

Sources: [Canadian Cancer Society](http://cancer.ca), Empower the Patient, [American Cancer Society](http://cancer.ca)

Tips for Returning to Work

living with cancer

Taking a leave from work means also planning when and how to return to your job. There's a lot to think about. This document can help you get started.

Talk to Your Healthcare Team

Your healthcare team can help you come up with a realistic timeframe for returning to work. Everyone recovers at their own pace, so be sure to let your healthcare team know how your recovery is going. They can then make adjustments to your recovery time based on your own unique situation.

Talk to Your Employer

When you believe you are close to returning to work, contact your boss or human resources department to arrange your transition back to work. Make sure you discuss any return-to-work provisions that may be in place or required. Be realistic about what you can expect to accomplish and what your employer can expect of you. Starting work gradually, with part-time or flexible hours, often helps.

If you work in a demanding or very physical job, you may have to change the way in which you work. If your work duties will need to be modified, try to get help from a vocational rehabilitation counsellor.

Your Rights and Responsibilities

If you're concerned about whether your employer will keep your job or accommodate your return to work, consult the [BC Human Rights Clinic](#) for advice to find out your rights and responsibilities.

Try Some Practice Days

It's important to make sure that you are both physically and emotionally ready to return to work. Try to create a work day at home. Get up at the same time as you would for work, get ready and then work at home doing something of a similar intensity to your paid work. If this is too much for you, use your remaining time away from work to plan ways to conserve your energy or to help plan out a realistic work schedule based on your abilities.



See a Counsellor if You Need To

Emotional rehabilitation is also important in any return-to-work plan. During your time off work you may want to see a counsellor who can help you with coping mechanisms, relaxation exercises, time management or managing feelings of depression or anxiety.

Get More Information if You Need It

The BC Cancer Agency has developed [Cancer and Returning to Work: A Practical Guide for Cancer Patients](#) to support people who are considering or attempting to return to work after cancer treatment. It offers information, resources and practical exercises.

The Canadian Cancer Society offers a variety of services to support individuals and their caregivers going through a cancer experience. Please visit cancer.ca or call our Cancer Information Service for more information - 1-888-939-3333 or email info@cis.cancer.ca. Ask about specific services available in your community to assist you during this time in your life.

New Normal: Support for Patients who have Finished Treatment for Breast or Colorectal Cancer

The Canadian Cancer Society recently introduced New Normal, a telephone-based peer support program for people who have completed treatment for breast or colorectal cancer. Volunteers with specialized training provide emotional support based on shared experience and are able to share appropriate resources. Program staff assess client suitability for the program and provide ongoing coaching and support to volunteers. For more information please call 1-800-822-8664 or email newnormal@bc.cancer.ca