



How to Support Employees with Cancer

living with cancer

Every year, cancer places a growing burden on employees in Canada. Whether they have cancer or are caring for a family member, friend or neighbour, cancer can create significant changes in the lives of your employees.

It's normal to wonder what you – as an employer, manager or human resources manager – should do, especially if you haven't been in this position before.

Hearing the News

When you hear that an employee has been diagnosed with cancer, encourage the employee to talk to an appropriate manager in your organization about what benefits they may be entitled to or what support plans are in place in the workplace. (Some employees may already have researched their options.) An appropriate manager might be their immediate supervisor, HR manager or occupational health and safety manager.

Meetings About the Diagnosis

When meeting about an employee's cancer diagnosis, the most important thing is to be as sensitive as you can to the employee's needs. The way you communicate needs to be tailored to that person. Think about how you're going to approach the conversation and base it on what you already know about the person and the situation. Some people are more open about personal issues than others. Some cultures will have a different understanding of what cancer is – it may even be a taboo subject.

If the employee wishes to have a third party – for example, a co-worker, friend, family member, union representative – at any meeting about their health, agree to this.

You must respect the employee's privacy, so handle communication and note-taking at these meetings very carefully. Never circulate information about the diagnosis without the employee's permission.

Preparing for the Meeting

Before going in to a meeting about a cancer diagnosis, make sure you know the answers to these questions:

- What are the employee's options for time off?
- What are the organization's policies on flexible working, work adjustment and returning to work after sick leave?
- Does your organization offer any other services that might help them (for example, counselling, extended medical benefits)?



Let the employee take the lead on what they are concerned about and what they would like to discuss with you. When it's your turn to move the conversation along, you might ask:

- How are you feeling physically? How are you feeling emotionally?
- What and how much information would you like your co-workers to know?

Do you have any idea of how much time off you might need for treatment, medical appointments and recovery?

Tips on Making the Meeting Go Smoothly

These meetings can be very hard, but there are ways to make them easier. Try to:

- Choose a private place to talk where you will not be interrupted.
- Be prepared for the meeting to go over time. Let the employee dictate the time needed.
- Show empathy.
- Show you are listening with verbal and non-verbal cues.
- Let employees know that it is okay to be upset. Stay calm and allow them time to recover if they become emotional. Continue the meeting later if your employee finds it hard to keep going.
- Respond to humour but do not make jokes yourself.

Try not to:

- Be afraid of silence.
- Be too quick to offer advice when discussing how to manage work during this time.
- Use clichés like “things could be worse” or “things will be all right.”
- Ignore or disregard your employee's feelings.
- Share stories about other people you know who have, or have had, cancer.

Make sure you end any meeting by reassuring the employee that their work is valued, that they are valued and that you are always willing to talk. Try to set a date for your next meeting so that you can be kept informed of the employee's situation as it develops.

Managing an Employee's Leave from Work

There's a lot that employers and HR departments can do to ease the stress, at least about work, for employees during their cancer experience. Information is the key to good decisions, so give the employee the following information in written form to allow them time to review and absorb it:

- any changes in work arrangements, including hours of work
- allowable time off for medical appointments
- what pay is covered by the employer before the disability period begins
- what stops or changes during the disability period and what stays the same (for example, vacation accrual, benefit coverage, seniority accumulation)



- **disability benefits** information, such as:
 - > when to expect payments
 - > how the payments will be issued (that is, by cheque or direct deposit)
 - > how the payments are calculated
 - > when the employee should expect a disability representative to check in with them
 - > what services are provided through the disability benefits provider

If your employee takes a leave from work, you will need to consider the employee's **Gradual Return to Work** (GRTW). During the GRTW period, the employee gradually increases their work hours until they are ready to go back to their normal work hours. It is crucial to make sure that you and the employee both fully understand what is acceptable during this period.

- Make the return-to-work plan a joint project so that you and the employee can develop a plan that meets both your needs.
- Be clear about the guidelines for taking sick time and time off for medical appointments, etc.
- Be clear about the guidelines for taking coffee and lunch breaks.
- Be clear about how vacation time is accrued during this period.

Don't forget to show employees that you care about them when they are away on sick leave:

- Invite the employee to special events in the workplace that they would normally be invited to.
- Make sure the employee's manager and co-workers make a real effort to stay in contact, without putting pressure on the employee to respond.

Building a Workplace that Supports Employees with Chronic Illness

If you are responsible for developing health benefits for your organization, consider the following ways to support employees with cancer:

- **Core Health Benefits policies:** In addition to the standard coverage for prescription drugs and dental benefits, consider coverage for paramedical services such as psychologists, counsellors, acupuncturists, naturopaths and nutritionists. Also consider the annual or lifetime limits of some plans that will effectively limit coverage when it is needed most.
- **InspireHealth benefit:** Integrated cancer care can play a significant role in helping a cancer patient through their experience. Ask your health benefits provider if coverage is offered to help offset the membership fee to this non-profit organization.
- **Health Spending Account (HSA) benefit:** This allows employees to be reimbursed for some additional health expenses that may not be covered under a core health benefits policy. This is a non-taxable benefit to the employee.



- **Personal/Wellness Spending Account benefit:** This allows employees to be reimbursed for health, wellness and fitness expenses. It can also include supplements, over-the-counter medications, medical supplies, insurance premiums (for critical illness, life or disability), professional development or educational courses, dependent or elder care, or professional fees (for example, estate and financial planning). This is a taxable benefit to the employee.
- **Employee Assistance Program (EAP):** This provides confidential support and services, such as emotional support or counselling, to help a person through their cancer journey.

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: [Macmillan Cancer Support](#); [Canadian Cancer Society – Helping Someone with Cancer](#), [Emotions and Cancer](#)

