

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Living with Cancer



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Understanding the Cancer Diagnosis of an Employee or Co-Worker

living with
cancer

One in two Canadians will hear the words “You have cancer” in their lifetimes. If someone you know is diagnosed with cancer, help them by learning about the disease. The first thing to understand is that cancer is more than 200 different diseases. The second thing to understand is that everyone’s cancer experience is different.

What is Cancer?

Cancer is a disease that starts in our cells. Our bodies are made up of trillions of cells, grouped together to form tissues and organs such as muscles and bones, the lungs and the liver. Genes inside each cell tell it when to grow, work, divide and die. Normally, our cells follow these instructions and we stay healthy. But sometimes the instructions get mixed up, causing the cells to grow and divide out of control or not die when they should. As more and more of these abnormal cells grow and divide, they can form a lump in the body called a tumour.

Tumours can be either benign (non-cancerous) or malignant (cancerous). Benign tumour cells stay in one place in the body and don’t spread. But these tumours can still get quite big. Non-cancerous tumours also don’t usually come back after they are removed. Malignant tumour cells can grow into nearby tissues and spread to other parts of the body. Cancer cells that spread to other parts of the body are called metastases. It is important to find malignant tumours as early as possible.

Cancers are named after the part of the body where they start. For example, cancer that starts in the bladder but spreads to the lung is called bladder cancer with lung metastases.

Cancer and Emotions

A cancer diagnosis may trigger many common emotions such as shock, worry, fear, anxiety, sadness and even hopelessness. Knowing what your co-worker or friend may be feeling can help you to be more supportive. It’s also important to remember that these feelings can come and go throughout the cancer journey.

You may be surprised to find out that many people with cancer feel guilty. They may worry that they’re a burden to their loved ones or think that if only they’d gone to the doctor sooner or lived their lives differently, they wouldn’t be in this situation. They can also feel very lonely, perhaps because they can’t do the things they used to do or because they feel that no one understands what they’re going through.



It's normal for you to feel some of the same emotions as your friend or co-worker. You may also feel uncomfortable about or threatened by the cancer diagnosis and want to avoid the situation by avoiding your friend or co-worker. Don't be surprised if you find yourself feeling angry about the diagnosis – the person with cancer might be very angry, too. Do recognize that your anger is about the situation and never direct your anger at the person with cancer.

What About Treatment?

A person with cancer will have a treatment plan developed just for them. Treatment depends on the type of cancer, the stage (the size and whether it has spread) and grade (how the cancer cells look and behave compared with normal cells) and the person's personal situation and wishes. And so, people with the same type of cancer may have very different treatment plans.

Most people with cancer will have surgery, chemotherapy or radiation or some combination of these conventional treatments. These treatments focus on interfering with cancer's ability to grow and spread. Research tells us that these are our best ways to stop cancer from spreading.

Surgery removes the cancer from the body.

Chemotherapy and other drug therapies are drugs given by mouth, injection or IV (intravenously).

Radiation therapy treats cancer with special x-rays targeted at the cancer cells. Radiation therapy can be external or internal.

Cancer and its treatment can cause side effects. Everyone reacts differently, but some common side effects are fatigue (extreme tiredness), nausea and vomiting, weight gain or loss, hair loss, mouth sores or skin problems.

Complementary therapies do not treat the cancer itself. Complementary therapies can be used to help people cope physically and emotionally with cancer and with side effects from cancer treatment. A complementary therapy is used together with conventional cancer treatments. For example, acupuncture to help with nausea caused by chemotherapy is a complementary therapy.

Integrative cancer care is an approach that combines conventional and complementary therapies throughout the cancer experience. The [BC Cancer Agency](#) provides some types of complementary care as part of their cancer treatment program. [InspireHealth](#) is a not-for-profit organization that offers an integrative cancer care program for people with cancer and their families.

Is Cancer Contagious?

This is not something you need to worry about. There is no evidence that close contact or having sex, kissing, touching, sharing meals or breathing the same air as someone with cancer can give you cancer.



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How Can I Find Out More?

If you need support or have any questions, contact the Canadian Cancer Society:

- Call us toll-free Monday to Friday at 1-888-939-3333 (TTY 1-866-786-3934). If you need help in another language, interpreters are available.
- Email info@cis.cancer.ca.
- Visit cancer.ca.
- Check out the Canadian Cancer Society's many [support programs](#).
- Download the Canadian Cancer Society's Brochure: [Listen First: And 9 other ways to support someone with cancer](#).

Sources: [Canadian Cancer Society – Helping Someone with Cancer](#); [Emotions and Cancer](#); [Complementary therapy booklet](#)