

# **On the job with cancer: Managing common workplace challenges**

## **Find out what challenges you may face as you return to work after cancer treatment or continue to work after your cancer diagnosis.**

For most people, work is a healthy part of life. Continuing to work during your cancer treatment or returning to work if you've taken some time off can make you feel healthier and more productive. Working gives you something to focus on besides your illness, helps you feel more in control and keeps you connected to people who care about you.

Whether you're returning to work after time off or continuing to work during your cancer treatment, you'll likely face some obstacles at your workplace. Prepare yourself by planning ahead and knowing what to do in each situation.

## **Decide who needs to know about your cancer**

You need to decide whether you want your co-workers to know about your cancer and, if so, how open you want to be. There's no right or wrong approach. You may want your supervisor to tell your co-workers about your cancer, or you may choose to do it yourself. Do what's comfortable for you.

You don't have to tell anyone about your cancer. If you're a private person, you can keep it to yourself. But, for practical reasons, it may make sense to tell your boss at the very least. If you need to take time off or need to work flexible hours, your boss will probably want to know why.

## **Expect varied reactions to your cancer from your co-workers**

Everyone deals with the news of cancer differently. Many of your co-workers will have questions and concerns. Some may seem to avoid you. Others may be overly solicitous. Some may even fear your cancer is contagious. Determine how you want to deal with others' behavior toward you. By and large, others will take their cues from you.

If you run into problems, resolve issues face to face with the person who is having a difficult time with your situation. Take your concerns to your supervisor if you and your co-worker can't work things out.

## **Work with your supervisor to make your workload manageable**

Depending on what you do, you might need some accommodations to complete your work. Whether that's flexible hours, job sharing or an entirely different task will depend on your needs. Talk with your supervisor about what changes can be made. Some people schedule treatments on Friday afternoons so that they have the weekend to rest and recuperate. Fatigue is common during and after cancer treatment, so plan accordingly.

## **Know your rights**

The Americans with Disabilities Act and the Family and Medical Leave Act offer protection from discrimination on the job. The Americans with Disabilities Act protects you from discrimination from your employer. It also states that you must be given "reasonable accommodations" to continue doing your job, if necessary. The Family and Medical Leave Act allows you to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave from your job for a serious medical condition without losing your job.

In addition, your state may have laws to protect you from employment discrimination. For questions regarding your particular situation, speak with someone from the human resources (HR) department of your organization. If your workplace doesn't have an HR department, consult a lawyer regarding your concerns or contact your local chapter of the American Cancer Society.

## **Educate your co-workers about cancer**

Some people may treat you differently or discriminate against you because they don't know much about cancer. Or they may believe stereotypes of people with cancer. For instance, they may believe cancer is a death sentence.

Organize brown-bag lunch meetings for your workplace with a speaker from your community who can talk about cancer. Correct people who make inaccurate assumptions about you based on the fact that you have cancer.

**From the Mayo Clinic** - <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/cancer/HQ01689>