



Going Back to Work

People with cancer often want to get back to work. Their jobs not only give them an income but also a sense of routine. Work helps people feel good about themselves.

Before you go back to work, talk with your doctor as well as your boss. You will all want to make sure you're well enough to do your job. You may need to work fewer hours or do your job in a different way. Some people feel well enough to work while they're having chemo or radiation treatment. Others need to take time off until their treatments are over.



Credit: iStock

Talking with Your Boss and Coworkers

“I was nervous about going back to work. I knew my supervisor and coworkers would be supportive, but I was afraid they would think I couldn't do my job like I used to.”

—Lynn

The response of coworkers about your cancer treatment may differ. Some people may be a huge source of support, while others may be a source of anger or frustration. Some people mean well, but they don't know the right thing to say. Maybe they just don't know how to offer support. Others don't want to deal with your cancer at all. They may think that you aren't able to work as hard as before.

If coworkers seem unsupportive, it could be because they're anxious for you or for themselves. Your cancer experience may threaten them because it reminds them that cancer can happen to anyone. Try to understand their fears and be patient as you try to regain a good relationship. But some people with cancer say that they get tired of trying to act cheerful around others. Many say that friendships change as they let go of their casual ones and give more time to the meaningful ones.

Relating to Others at Work

How do you relate to other people in your life when you go back to work? Does it feel good to return or do you worry how others will react? Here are some tips for returning to work:

- **Accept help.** When people offer to help, say yes, and have in mind some things that they could do to make your life easier. In this way, you will get the support you need, and they will feel helpful.

- **Talk to others.** If you find that a coworker's feelings about cancer are hurting you, try to resolve the problem with that person face-to-face. If it's still affecting your work after that, your manager, employee assistance counselor, or personnel office may be able to help.
- **Address problems that come up from the start.** Supervisors or coworkers may be able to help those around you understand how you want to be treated.
- **Try to keep up contacts during your recovery.** Coworkers will worry about you. But if they are kept up-to-date about your progress, they will be less anxious and scared. Talk to them on the phone, send email, or appoint a trusted friend or family member to do this for you. Your return to work or other activities will be easier for you and others if you stay in touch.
- **Plan what you'll say about your cancer.** There is no right way to deal with others about your illness, but you do need to think about what you'll say when you're back on the job. Some people don't want to focus on their cancer or be linked in people's minds with the disease. Others are very open about it, speaking frankly with their boss or other workers to air concerns, correct wrong ideas, and decide how to work together. The best approach is the one that feels right to you.

Your Legal Rights at Work

Some people with cancer face roadblocks when they try to go back to work or get a new job. Even people who had cancer many years ago may still have trouble. Employers may not treat them fairly because of false beliefs about cancer. For example, an employer may think cancer can be spread from person to person or that people with cancer take too many sick days. Some employers also think that people with cancer are poor insurance risks.

It is against the law to discriminate against (treat unfairly) workers who have disabilities such as cancer. There are national laws that protect your rights as a worker. And if you're looking for a new job, you have no legal obligation to talk about your cancer history unless your past health has a direct impact on the job you seek. For more information, go to the [Cancer Legal Resource Center](#) website.

Handling Problems at Work

- Decide how to handle the problem.
 - What are your rights as an employee?
 - Are you willing to take action to correct a problem?
 - Do you still want to work there? Or would you rather look for a new job?
- If necessary, ask your employer to adjust to your needs.
 - Start by talking informally to your supervisor, personnel office, employee assistance counselor, shop steward, or union representative.
 - Ask for a change that would make it easier for you to keep your job (for example, flextime, working at home, special equipment at work).
 - Document each request and its outcome for your records.
- Get help working with your employer if you need it.
 - Ask your doctor or nurse to find times for follow-up visits that don't conflict with your other responsibilities.

- Get your doctor to write a letter to your employer or personnel officer explaining how, if at all, your cancer may affect your work or your schedule.

Talk with your social worker about laws in your state. Your social worker can give you the name of the state agency that protects your rights as an employee. You may also want to ask about benefits you can get as a person with cancer.

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