

WEB EXCLUSIVES

During Treatment: Cancer & Your Career

Choosing to work through treatment requires planning ahead

Many survivors worry about job security and push themselves to work through cancer-related pain and fatigue. But balancing cancer and work is possible with a proactive plan, accommodating employers, and medical advances that include less toxic treatments and medication to alleviate side effects. With almost half of all cancer patients diagnosed under the age of 65, about 60 percent will continue to work. Of those who do stop work during treatment, up to 80 percent may return to the workforce.

How to Make It Work

Cancer stereotypes have changed dramatically, but patients, as well as employers, may still have assumptions about how a diagnosis will or will not affect work. Experts recommend having a plan in place before discussing your diagnosis at work. Here are some tips:

- > Enter into the conversation with your supervisor and coworkers with as much knowledge as possible, and don't be afraid to suggest what would work best for you during treatment.
- > Develop a communication strategy with your supervisor and coworkers that includes goals, your treatment schedule, possible side effects, delegation of job duties, and who to tell about your diagnosis.
- > Explore the company's policy on sick leave, telecommuting, and flex time.
- > Talk with your medical team about what would make treatment easier, such as medication taken orally and to alleviate side effects.
- > Your situation may change depending on how treatment goes and how it affects your needs at work in the long run. Be up front about what you can and cannot do and let your supervisor know when you need help.

> You may need to decrease your workload, work from home, or take time off from your job because of treatment schedules or side effects, such as fatigue or nausea. Receiving chemotherapy late in the week can give you the weekend to recover.

Know Your Rights

The rate of job discrimination against cancer patients and survivors has decreased, partly because of the protection from the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and other antidiscrimination laws that keep survivors from being treated unfairly in the workplace.

Discrimination that does occur is often a result of misconceptions regarding cancer and a survivor's ability to work. A small portion of cases filed with the ADA are by cancer patients and survivors. If you are discriminated against, experts recommend legal action as a last resort. Instead, familiarize yourself with your company's policies and talk with the human resources department about your issues and possible solutions. Often, information from social workers or your medical team and support from coworkers can diffuse a situation. If legal action is the only alternative, keep written records of all actions and communications.

Although you have the right to keep your diagnosis a secret, it is recommended you disclose your cancer history in case it affects your job performance and you want your employer to provide accommodations under the ADA. If your company has at least 15 employees, it is required to offer reasonable accommodations for you, which can include a change in job duties or flex time.

The Family and Medical Leave Act also protects jobs at companies with 50 or more employees for up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave and guarantees the continuation of benefits and health insurance.

Caregivers can also take advantage of FMLA. To qualify, you must have worked more than 1,250 hours for more than one year and intend to return to the job after you leave.

If you took time off for treatment, going back to work may make you feel better by helping you resume your career. Talk to your supervisor about long-term side effects you have and come up with a plan for how to manage them during work hours.