

Returning to Work After Cancer

by Carolyn Messner, DSW, MSW, BCD, LCSW-R, and Jessica Puma

This past decade has witnessed dramatic breakthroughs in the detection and treatment of cancer. Innovative methods of managing side effects of cancer treatments have made it possible for more individuals with cancer to work while receiving cancer treatment.

Many studies show that returning to work may contribute to cancer survivors' emotional and financial well-being. Besides income, it provides satisfaction, social support, and the opportunity to interact with coworkers and colleagues. Continuing to work productively can be vital to your sense of well-being, as it is a reminder that you do have a life apart from cancer. Being a valued employee or trusted coworker may be a helpful distraction from the rigors of cancer treatments and follow-up appointments.

Each workplace has its own unique culture. Choosing whether to tell your employer about your cancer is a personal decision. Many myths about cancer exist in our society, including the workplace. For instance, employers and coworkers may assume that you are not able to perform job responsibilities as well as before cancer. Sometimes, these misconceptions can lead to subtle or blatant discrimination. It is important to become familiar with the laws before deciding whether to disclose a cancer diagnosis.

The Americans with Disability Act requires that organizations with 15 or more employees comply with ADA guidelines. In order to take advantage of ADA protection, you must meet the ADA definition of "disabled person," you must qualify for the job and be able to perform "the essential job functions," and you must not pose a risk to your own or others' health and safety.

The ADA recommends that any accommodation needed does not cause "undue hardship" to the employer. Flexible work hours to meet treatment schedules and doctors appointments are the most frequent workplace accommodation required by people living with

cancer. If you require flextime, it is important to disclose your cancer diagnosis to a supervisor or Human Resources to be protected under the ADA. If no reason is given for frequent requests for flextime, you could risk jeopardizing job security. For more information about the ADA, call (800) 514-0301 or visit www.ada.gov.



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The Family and Medical Leave Act enables the person living with cancer, cancer survivors, and family members to take unpaid leave of up to 12 weeks within one calendar

year. The FMLA applies to organizations with 50 or more employees. The employee must have worked with his



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or her employer for at least one year, and employers must continue health benefits during the leave. Leave does not have to be taken all at once, but can be taken in blocks of time. To learn

more about the FMLA, visit the Department of Labor website at www.dol.gov.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is a federal agency that enforces the provisions of the ADA and FMLA and assists citizens who feel that they have been discriminated against in the workplace. If you feel you are being treated unfairly, contact the EEOC at (800) 669-4000 or visit www.eeoc.gov.

Editor's Note: Dr. Carolyn Messner is director of Education and Training at CancerCare and past president of the Association of Oncology Social Work. Jessica Puma is a freshman at Columbia University who spent her Prep for Prep Internship in the education department at CancerCare. ■

5 Tips for Your Return to Work

1 Talk to your healthcare team about the practicality of returning to work. Discuss with your doctor the specific type of work you do, your workload, and your work hours, so that you and your doctor are able to make the most informed decision. If your oncologist supports your return to work, obtain a letter on letterhead from your doctor saying that it is safe for you to return to work, including any accommodations you require.

2 Be realistic about your cancer, your energy, and your work-life balance in transitioning back to work. Rehearse what you plan to say when asked how you are feeling. Brief, accurate information is likely to make colleagues more comfortable

and encourage a supportive dialogue. It can also help dispel myths about cancer.

3 Plan for practical needs you may require to support your return to work. Consider a test run before returning to your workplace.

4 Learn about the provisions of the Americans with Disability Act, Family and Medical Leave Act, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, state laws, and human rights law.

5 Be thorough and plan the details of your return to work so that you feel in control of how you will communicate with your workplace about your cancer and cope with your return to work.