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Balancing Cancer and Your Job

Once, getting a cancer diagnosis meant giving up your job for a new one: surviving. Today, thanks to treatment advances, many people keep working during treatment.

By Melissa T. Shultz

Cancer in the Workplace

Each year, 650,000 people who work outside the home learn they have cancer. Along with the shattering diagnosis comes another challenge: What will I do about work? A recent University of Pennsylvania study reported that about 60 percent of people diagnosed with cancer continue working.

Most of us have no choice, of course: We need the health insurance and the regular income. But there's another reason: The prognosis for cancer patients is better than ever: 66 percent are alive at least five years after their diagnosis and are hardly ready to retire.

Given this, it's nice to think our employer would be there for us if we got sick, especially since we're not the only ones who would benefit. Cancer and Careers, a program of Cosmetic Executive Women, Inc., a New York City-based trade organization, maintains that helping employees with cancer builds company loyalty and helps a business keep talented employees. But even the most evolved company may not always grasp exactly what an employee needs or is entitled to. She will still have to negotiate hurdles that require a basic knowledge of her employer's policies as well as national and state laws on sick leave. If you have recently been diagnosed, these strategies will help you strike a balance between handling your cancer and your job.

Do Your Homework

1. Do your homework. Find out how long your treatment will last, its side effects, and how you might be affected. Good sources of information? An oncology nurse or social worker at the facility where you'll be treated. Because they regularly work with cancer patients, they understand the challenges of working through treatment, explains Barbara Hoffman, an attorney and founding board member of the National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship. Among the questions you should ask: "When can I expect changes in my appearance, such as hair loss?" "Will I need a modified work schedule?" "How much time off will I need?" A 2004 study published in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* found that people missed, on average, 30.5 days of work in the first year after they were diagnosed with

cancer; by contrast, people who didn't have cancer missed just 5.7 days.

2. Review how much leave you are entitled to. This includes sick days, vacation time, and any disability policies your company may have. Most people who work for a company with 50 or more employees are covered by the Family and Medical Leave Act, which permits 12 weeks of medical leave -- usually unpaid -- during each 12-month period. Companies with fewer than 50 employees may have state-regulated family and medical leave laws. Check with your state's workforce commission or commission on human rights for details or go to the Department of Labor's Web site and search by state.

[Department of Labor >>](#)

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, any company with at least 15 employees must make reasonable "accommodations" for disabilities, including those caused by cancer treatment. For example, your employer must adjust your work hours, your responsibilities, or your work location if any or all of them compromise your health. Also, you can't be treated differently -- meaning you can't be turned down for a promotion or paid less. However, you can be fired if you can't perform essential job duties after your employer makes accommodations. If your company has fewer than 15 employees, accommodation laws are state-regulated. For information, go to [ada.gov](#) or contact your state's workforce commission or commission on human rights.

[ada.gov >>](#)

Talk to Your Supervisor

3. Schedule a meeting with your supervisor and/or company's human resources representative. The amount of information you share is your call. But "to be legally entitled to accommodations, you must be specific about your diagnosis and what you need your employer to do," says Hoffman. (Note: Medical information is confidential and can only be shared with those who need to know about your illness in order to provide the changes you request.) Examples of what you might say include: *"I'll be in treatment for cancer for 12 weeks and I'll need that time off."* *"I'm not going to be able to travel to the upcoming business meeting."* *"I may need to split my workload with coworkers."* *"I have to leave work two hours earlier for the next six Fridays for radiation treatments. After that, my doctor thinks I can return to my regular schedule."* Since people respond differently to treatment, plan to re-evaluate your situation every few weeks. Document any conversation you have with your employer. That way, you have a record of what was said in case questions come up later.

4. Discuss with your employer the best way to tell your coworkers about your illness. Again, how much you reveal and at what point is a matter of personal choice.

Web Sites That Can Help

If you are diagnosed with cancer, these organizations can help you learn more about your illness, and how to juggle treatment and work.

American Cancer Society

The ACS provides detailed information on the different types of cancer as well as prevention, screening, treatment, and clinical trials, as well as advice on working with cancer and coping with legal and financial issues related to the disease.

[American Cancer Society >>](#)

Cancer Care

This national nonprofit organization provides free counseling, education, financial help, and other services to anyone affected by cancer.

[Cancer Care >>](#)

Cancer and Careers

This organization offers free publications, legal and financial advice, career coaching, support groups, and educational seminars to working women with cancer. They also offer guidance to employers and managers who have an employee battling cancer. A program of the CEW Foundation, the charitable arm of Cosmetic Executive Women, Inc, a New York-based trade organization of 4,000 executives in the beauty, cosmetics, and related industries.

[Cancer and Careers >>](#)

National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship

A survivor-led cancer advocacy organization, it works for quality cancer care and empowers cancer survivors.

[National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship >>](#)

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