

Work

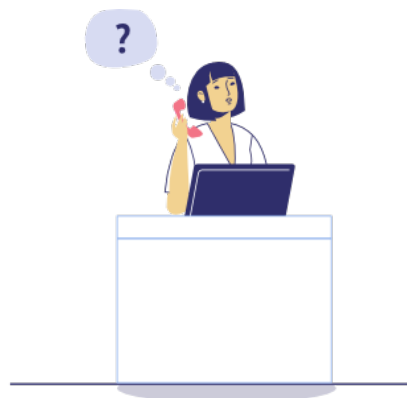


“It wasn’t just a question of no longer working. It was also losing my routine, losing all the people who I had begun to look at as more than just colleagues.”

Mei-Ying
Diagnosed with cancer

How does this affect me?

Your schedule and ability to work could change during cancer treatment. Some people want to keep working, some may reduce their hours, and some need to stop working altogether. This can depend on many different things including your treatment schedule, treatment side effects and type of job you have. In addition to your physical health, it is important to focus on your emotional health after a cancer diagnosis—how you feel and how you cope with these feelings. Some cancer patients find that being faced with cancer allowed them to slow down from a once hectic life pace and realize there’s more to life than working. How you may choose to work can affect your emotions in ways that might surprise you. It might make you frustrated, angry, or even feel relieved. These are normal responses that a lot of people go through.



What can I do to help balance work and life?

You may have questions and things to consider with respect to managing cancer in your workplace. The following are some of the most common questions:

? Do I need to tell people at work?

- This decision is entirely your choice. You would only need to tell your boss if your ability to work is impacted. By law, your boss is not allowed to tell your colleagues without your consent and is not allowed to discriminate for medical reasons.
- In most cases, telling people helps. What you choose to share depends on your working environment, culture, relationships with the people you work with and the way you feel about the circumstances.
- If you need to take time off or change your working situation (for example, working from home or modifying your hours), you can ask for a doctor's note that says your request is based on "medical reasons". If you don't want to share your diagnosis, this is all your boss needs to know.
- If you decide to share your diagnosis with other members of your team, think about whom to tell and how much detail you would like to share. For example, if you work closely with someone, you may feel like you don't want to worry them. Alternatively you may feel like they need to know. Again, this is entirely your decision.
- Not telling anyone at work protects your privacy, but some colleagues may gossip, which can add stress. On the other hand, your colleagues may surprise you by their understanding if you choose to share your diagnosis. They can't support you or help you if they don't know what's going on!

? Do I have to take time off work?

- Whether you choose to, or you have to, cancer treatments may mean taking a few days off work or taking several months off for recovery. This could come in the form of sick days, or you may opt for a medical leave of absence. You can look into this with your employer and your healthcare team can help support with any necessary forms.
- Giving up work, even for a short time, makes some people feel like they've given up on beating cancer. If you feel this way, try instead to think of your time off as a chance to focus on your health.
- For many of us, our jobs are closely tied to how we see ourselves and our place in the world. Working reminds some people that there is more to their life than cancer. You may find that work can help keep your mind off your illness. Also, being around other people at work and having their support may make you feel better.
- For some people, time off work may be welcome. It can give you the opportunity to focus on your self-care. The cancer diagnosis is always unexpected and it can provoke a sense of loss of control. There are some things you can do to regain a sense of control. Through self-care, you pay attention to your needs, strengthen your reserves and perhaps even build resilience. Learning to lovingly care for yourself is not the same thing as being self-indulgent. Self-care during cancer treatment is an essential and vital part of wellbeing and health.
- It can be stressful, however, to stop working if it leads to money problems. Here are some options you can explore for alternative sources of income:
 - Consider federal government programs (such as employment insurance, pension plan, disability and retirement plans).
 - Consider provincial government programs (such as hardship assistance, income assistance and persons with disability designation).
 - Consider private long-term disability, if you have access to this program.
- For more information see the factsheet [Financial concerns](#).

? Should I return to work?

Most cancer survivors go back to their jobs if they are able to. It can help life feel more normal, although it sometimes takes time to recover fully so take it easy on yourself.

- For some, working part-time and gradually increasing hours is a way to adjust. Once you're back, give yourself time to adapt. It may seem hard at first to reconnect with the team. There could be new people or a new boss to get to know. Be patient with yourself, you can adjust to the changes.

? Am I looking for a new job?

Some people with cancer change jobs or even careers.

- When looking for a new job, don't lie about your situation, but there is no need to disclose cancer unless this directly impacts your ability to do the job.
- A career counsellor or social worker can help you prepare for this step.

! Discrimination is against the law

Although most workplaces treat people fairly and respect the law, some people with cancer can face problems on the job when they try to continue working while in treatment or when they return to work. If you are having difficulty at your workplace, keep in mind:

- As long as you are qualified for the job, employers cannot treat you differently from other workers. By law, your boss has to support reasonable changes, such as changes in work hours or duties.
- You can reach out to your union or a lawyer to know your options.



What help do I need?

Write down a plan for your next steps at work: both before and after treatment. Get feedback on the plan from all parties involved, for example your work team, your family or your boss. Make sure this plan is flexible enough to take on life's changes and requirements from your work team. Here are some ideas of what you can include in your plan:

- Start and end dates
- Expected working hours
- Duties and tasks
- Schedule for increasing hours and tasks gradually upon your return
- Medical limitations or restrictions
- Any accommodations needed for your job

For more information see [Getting Support](#).



Where can I find help?

Your supervisor or boss

- They can help you adjust your schedule, tasks, offer you more flexibility, plan time off and set the tone for how you would like to be treated at work.
- If you'd like, they can also help share the news of your diagnosis with your team.

Human Resources

- They have information about your options for sick leaves, vacation leaves, time without pay or other time away from work. They also know your employer's responsibilities and can coach your boss about them if needed.

Union representative or lawyer

- If you are scared about discrimination, they can help you with this. You can search your company phone directory or website to learn more about your union. A lawyer may be accessible through government programs or through a private firm – see the [Resources](#) section for more information.

Coworkers

- Maintaining contact and talking to them can reduce stress you may feel about going back to work and offer a source of support.

 **Healthcare team**

- The team can help you arrange treatment times around work, manage side effects during working hours and help you understand what to expect.
- Your team can also help with long-term disability forms if needed.
- Talk about your challenges and work together to plan how to make working safe and successful.

 **Job counsellor or social worker**

- They can assist you with finding a new job, adjusting your CV, accessing rehabilitation and understanding insurance benefits.

 **Quebec Cancer Foundation**

- The Foundation provides a [resource directory](#) where you can search for the organizations near you offering a variety of services including home help, lodging, transportation, and other supportive resources.

For more information see [Getting support](#).



What can I do to look after myself?

Keeping up healthy habits can help your overall wellbeing as you go through transitions at work. Regular self-care practices can reduce the adverse effects of stress, sleep disturbances and anxiety. It has also been shown to prevent overload and help build focus. For some ideas to get started with effective self-care visit [Self Care During Cancer](#). The following are some general tips to ensure you are eating well and staying active. For more information see [Looking after yourself](#).

Eat well

- You might need more energy or calories during treatment to not lose weight.
- Drink plenty of liquids so you don't get dehydrated, even more so on days when you are unable to eat.
- Protein can help your body heal and maintain a healthy immune system. Protein is found in fish, poultry, eggs, nuts, dried beans, lean red meat.
- Check with your healthcare team to find out if there any foods or beverages that you should not eat or drink because of your cancer or treatment.

Move your body

- It is generally fine to exercise during treatment, but check with your healthcare team before starting.
- Physical activity can improve your sleep and appetite and lessen treatment side effects like nausea and fatigue.
- Choose an activity that you enjoy doing or would like to try, and that you can fit into your schedule without too much difficulty.

Resources

For more information on managing work and cancer, check out the resources below.

[McGill University and BC Cancer – Cancer and Work](#)

[Government of Canada – Canadian Human Rights Commission](#) or call 1-888-214-1090

[Barreau du Quebec – Find a Lawyer](#)

Acknowledgement of sources

The content of this document has been adapted from the following sources:

- Coping When You Have Cancer. Canadian Cancer Society 2017.
- Disclosing Your Cancer Experience at Work. BC Cancer Agency 2007.
- Returning to Work and Long Term Disability Forms: What Should You and Your Physician Consider? BC Cancer Agency 2007.
- Work & School. BC Cancer 2020.
- Employment Rights of Cancer Survivors. Leukemia & Lymphoma Society of Canada 2020.
- QUAND LES MOTS VOUS MANQUENT...Lorsque le cancer frappe au travail. Fondation Québécoise du Cancer. 2009.

Healthcare professional endorsement

The content of this document has been reviewed and approved by a team of healthcare professionals and clinical experts.

Disclaimer

Please note that this fact sheet is not intended as a substitute for consultation with a healthcare professional. If you have questions about your health, or any medical issue, you should contact a healthcare professional right away. You should not delay seeking medical advice, or disregard professional medical advice, because of information in this fact sheet. Before beginning any health treatment, always consult your doctor. All care has been taken to ensure that the information contained in this document is accurate at the time of publication. e-IMPAQc is not responsible for any injury or damage to persons or property arising out of, or related to, any use of the fact sheet, or because of any errors or omissions.

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