

CANCER IN THE WORKPLACE

HR Tip Sheet

For human resource (HR) professionals supporting employees diagnosed with cancer, in treatment and beyond

One in two men and one in three women in the United States will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime. Therefore, it is likely that an employee (or someone in his or her family) will be diagnosed with cancer. Then the employee will probably come to you for help.

HR professionals are critical points of contact for employees because of their expertise in a variety of employment policies and benefits. To support employees with cancer, here is key information you should have on hand.



REVIEW COMPANY POLICIES, PROCEDURES AND BENEFITS

Do your homework. The following checklist identifies HR/benefits information that an employee with a serious illness, like cancer, may ask about:



Medical and drug (prescription) coverage, including any cancer-specific programs such as a Centers of Excellence network



Cancer/health navigator or advocacy programs



Leave



Employee assistance program (EAP)



Workplace accommodations, including flexible scheduling



Well-being programs, such as those aimed to help employees improve physical health, cope with stress, build resilience and manage finances



Community-based resources, such as the local American Cancer Society chapter or hospital-based resources



GETTING THE NEWS

Support, encourage and listen. When an employee shares his or her cancer diagnosis, show your interest and concern. Focus on the employee with cancer; do not give advice or share stories about others who had cancer.

Here are some examples of supportive statements:

- *“I don’t know exactly what to say, but I hope you know we are here to help you.”*
- *“I’m sorry you are going through this.”*
- *“If you want to talk about it, I’m here.”*
- *“Let me know what you need me to do to help.”*



GIVING EMPLOYEES THE RESOURCES THEY NEED

Human resource professionals are central to connecting employees to information about their benefits and explaining the types of leave and accommodations that may be provided. Many employees with cancer will choose to continue working if they feel well enough, but they may have additional questions about navigating the workplace during cancer treatment.



HR professionals can provide important information about:

- **Flexible work schedules:** An employee with cancer will need time to go to doctor's appointments and receive treatments. Review strategies like working from home or moving to a part-time schedule, as well as intermittent family medical leave.
- **Taking a leave of absence:** Explain the various types of leave available to employees, particularly those who feel they will be too sick to continue working. Examples of leave include: paid time off (PTO), sick leave, continuous or intermittent family medical leave and short-term disability.
- **Health insurance coverage:** An employee with cancer may have questions about health insurance coverage for cancer treatment. Employees with questions about cost may benefit from information about minimizing out-of-pocket expenses with in-network providers. You can also connect the employee to programs through the health plan or care management vendor to find a doctor who specializes in treating his or her type of cancer. Managing side effects may be a challenge – encourage employees to speak to their doctor about getting a referral to a cancer rehabilitation specialist to help them manage side effects.
- **Sharing the news with co-workers and supervisor:** Some employees may ask for help talking with their team or supervisor. Offer to arrange and attend a meeting with their supervisor to discuss accommodations and leave. It is important for employees to know that they aren't required to tell anyone the details of their diagnosis or treatment. If employees do choose to share the news with their co-workers, they may find that co-workers offer helpful support and encouragement.



COMPLYING WITH EMPLOYMENT LAW

Be aware of legal requirements that apply to employees with cancer:

- **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):** Prohibits employers from discriminating against employees based on their physical abilities. The American Cancer Society has information on how the ADA can apply to people with cancer.
- **Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA):** Employees can take FMLA if they have a serious health condition and are unable to perform the essential functions of their job.



DURING TREATMENT

Needs may change during treatment, depending on how the person with cancer responds and feels. Continue to check in regularly to help guide and adjust plans. Periodic check-ins also demonstrate that you care and want to help.

Common changes that may occur during treatment include:

- **Type of schedule flexibility:** During the course of treatment, appointment days and times may change, or the employee may feel sick and need shorter days or more time off. Work with the employee to accommodate his or her changing needs.
- **Modify leave type or work responsibilities:** The employee may need to change from intermittent leave to continuous leave, or consider taking on a different set of responsibilities. If such changes are needed, offer to arrange a meeting between the direct supervisor, disability manager and EAP.



AFTER TREATMENT

An employee's need for cancer care doesn't end with active treatment. The individual may still need time off for follow-up appointments and treatment, or still need accommodations at work.

- **Cancer care may still be needed:** Many employees with cancer will continue to have essential appointments to help them stay healthy. Some people with cancer will continue to have regular treatments to help keep the cancer from coming back, or to treat a recurrence.
- **Side effects:** Some cancer survivors have long-term or late physical effects of their treatment. Encourage employees to speak with their care team about ways to manage these side effects, including getting referrals to specialists who can help. Examples include:
 - Fatigue
 - Memory loss or difficulty concentrating
 - Numbness or tingling due to nerve damage
 - Heart or lung problems
- **Continued flexibility:** Employees recovering from cancer may still need scheduling flexibility for checkups or to help them ease back into a full-time work schedule.

WANT TO LEARN MORE? [American Cancer Society - Working During and After Cancer Treatment](#)
[National Business Group on Health - Quick Assessment Guide to Cancer Treatment and Prevention](#)
[Cancer and Careers – Employers and Manager Resources](#)

