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Returning to Work After Cancer [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 11/2012

*Watch the "Moving Forward" video series about work[3] from ASCO and the LIVE**STRONG** Foundation, adapted from this content.*

After treatment for cancer, young adults often look forward to returning to the workforce. It provides opportunities to reconnect with colleagues and friends, focus on something other than cancer, get involved in interesting and challenging projects, and start regaining a sense of ?normal?. Although it is also a time of transition that may feel overwhelming, preparation may ease your anxiety about going back to work. Consider taking the following steps:

Know your rights

Get to know your workplace rights and responsibilities, which will help you plan the details of your return to work and prepare appropriate responses to challenges you may face.

Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) [4]**.** You have probably heard of FMLA and used it to cover your time off during treatment. Under FMLA, you may take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave in a 12-month period. To be eligible for FMLA benefits, you must work for an employer that has at least 50 employees within 75 miles. In addition, you must have worked for the employer for a total of 12 months and at least 1,250 hours over the previous 12 months.

FMLA does not have to be taken as 12 weeks in a row; it can be used intermittently, applying after you've returned to the workplace. For example, some people use FMLA to go back to work part time while they are regaining strength and transitioning to their responsibilities. Some employers require that their employees use available sick or vacation time for part or all of the 12 weeks, so check with your human resources department for information on your workplace's policies.

Other key factors in FMLA include the following:

- Employers are required to continue your group health insurance coverage while you are under FMLA on the same terms as if you were still working.
- You are entitled to return to your original job or to an equivalent job with equivalent pay and benefits.

Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) [5]**.** Federal and state laws protect the employment rights of cancer survivors with disabilities. For example, the ADA, enforced by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunities Commission, requires that your employer provide "reasonable accommodations" to allow you to do your job, as long as you are qualified to perform the essential duties of your position. Accommodations may include a modified or flexible work schedule, modifications to your job responsibilities, or physical changes to your workspace. In addition, the ADA prohibits your employer from discriminating against you because of cancer and protects you from being asked personal questions other than job-related medical questions. Learn more about cancer and workplace discrimination [6].

Decide when to return to work

Talk with your doctor about whether you are ready to return to work. The timing depends on the type of cancer and treatment you had and the type of job you perform. If your job is stressful or physically demanding, or if you work in a setting?such as a hospital or daycare center?where exposure to infections is common, you may need to wait longer before returning to work. Ongoing treatments or side effects, such as fatigue, may also cause delays.

Coordinate with your employer

When you decide it is time for you to return to work, set up a telephone or in-person meeting with your human resources department to discuss transition plans. Ask whether your employer has a formal "return-to-work" or disability management program. Other topics that you should cover include flexible work options, job accommodations you may need, and your insurance and benefits coverage.

Also consider taking these steps to make the transition easier:

- Set up frequent meetings with your manager to evaluate the transition and make any necessary adjustments.
- Inform your manager when you will have follow-up care appointments and how you plan to work around them, if possible.
- Adjust your daily routine, scheduling important meetings or tasks for times when you are feeling best.
- Schedule medical treatment appointments late in the day or before the weekend to give you time to recover.
- Modify your workspace, if possible, so that you can be comfortable and productive.
- Don't overload yourself with work; be realistic about what you can handle, and take small breaks during the day to help you maintain your energy level.
- Use lists and reminders or set meeting and task alarms on your office email system if you find that you have trouble concentrating.

Communicate with coworkers

It?s your decision whether you choose to tell coworkers about your cancer experience. However, if you have been absent for a while or your physical appearance has changed, some colleagues may have questions. Decide what you want to tell people and how. You may decide to have private conversations with a few close coworkers. Or you may find it easier to tell everyone at the same time during a meeting.

It always helps to keep your explanation simple and let people know how your return to work will affect them. For example, you might consider saying, ?I've completed treatment for cancer, and I'm currently doing well. It?s good to be back at work. Just so you know, I will be here 20 hours per week for the next four weeks, and I will return full time after that. In the meantime, Joe Smith will be covering Projects A and B.? Learn more about sharing your story [7].

Some employers and coworkers may not respond well. Their reactions may have more to do with their past experiences or lack of experiences with cancer. However, most cancer survivors find that their coworkers are supportive and caring. And people often take your lead; if you are comfortable as you talk about your experience with cancer, they will likely feel the same.

Find help

If you are having difficulty making the transition back to work, talk with a social worker [8] or join a support group [9] to learn from the experiences of other young adult cancer survivors.

Also consider talking with a vocational (job) counselor if your cancer experience has reshaped your career priorities and caused you to question whether they fit with your current job. These changes are common and may help guide your career in a new direction.

More Information

Going Back to Work After Cancer [10]

Cancer and Workplace Discrimination [6]

Finding a Job After Cancer [11]

Cancer in Young Adults [12]

Additional Resources

Cancer and Careers [13]

Job Accommodation Network [14]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/young-adults/life-after-treatment/returning-work-after-cancer
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/multimedia/videos/young-adults-cancer/work

[4] http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs28.htm
[5] http://www.ada.gov/
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/25298
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/24672
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/24556
[9] http://www.cancer.net/node/25383
[10] http://www.cancer.net/node/24549
[11] http://www.cancer.net/node/24524
[12] http://www.cancer.net/node/25117
[13] http://www.cancerandcareers.org
[14] http://www.jan.wvu.edu/