



# When Someone You Work With Has Cancer

Finding out that someone you work with has cancer can be difficult. You may have many questions, both about cancer itself and about how you should talk and act around this person. You may wonder how your work situation will be affected by their diagnosis and treatment. Supervisors may wonder what they can do to best help the person while still getting the work done.

If you are very close to the person who has cancer, this can be a frightening and stressful time for you, too. Here, we will try to answer some of your questions about cancer and the workplace. We also share some ideas about how you can show your concern and offer your help to someone with cancer.

## General questions and answers

### What is cancer?

The body is made up of hundreds of millions of living cells. Normal body cells grow, divide, and die in an orderly fashion. During the early years of a person's life, normal cells divide faster to allow the person to grow. After the person becomes an adult, most cells divide only to replace worn-out or dying cells or to repair injuries.

Cancer begins when cells in a part of the body start to grow out of control. There are many kinds of cancer, but they all start because of out-of-control growth of abnormal cells.

Cancer cell growth is different from normal cell growth. Instead of dying, cancer cells continue to grow and form new, abnormal cells. Cancer cells can also invade (grow into) other tissues, something that normal cells cannot do. Growing out of control and invading other tissues are what makes a cell a cancer cell.

Cells become cancer cells because of damage to DNA. DNA is in every cell and directs all its actions. In a normal cell, when DNA gets damaged the cell either repairs the

damage or the cell dies. In cancer cells, the damaged DNA is not repaired, but the cell doesn't die like it should. Instead, this cell goes on making new cells that the body does not need. These new cells will all have the same damaged DNA as the first cell does.

People can inherit damaged DNA, but most DNA damage is caused by mistakes that happen while the normal cell is reproducing or by something in our environment. Sometimes the cause of the DNA damage is something obvious, like cigarette smoking. But often no clear cause is found.

In most cases the cancer cells form a tumor. Some cancers, like leukemia, rarely form tumors. Instead, these cancer cells involve the blood and blood-forming organs and circulate through other tissues where they grow.

Cancer cells often travel to other parts of the body, where they begin to grow and form new tumors that replace normal tissue. This process is called *metastasis*. It happens when the cancer cells get into the bloodstream or lymph vessels of our body.

No matter where a cancer may spread, it is always named for the place where it started. For example, breast cancer that has spread to the liver is still called breast cancer, not liver cancer. Likewise, prostate cancer that has spread to the bone is metastatic prostate cancer, not bone cancer.

Different types of cancer can behave very differently. For example, lung cancer and breast cancer are very different diseases. They grow at different rates and respond to different treatments. That is why people with cancer need treatment that is aimed at their particular kind of cancer.

Not all tumors are cancerous. Tumors that aren't cancer are called *benign*. Benign tumors can cause problems -- they can grow very large and press on healthy organs and tissues. But they cannot grow into (invade) other tissues. Because they can't invade, they also can't spread to other parts of the body (metastasize). These tumors are almost never life threatening.

## Is cancer contagious?

No, cancer is not contagious. In the past, people often avoided those who had cancer. They were afraid of all kinds of diseases, and didn't know enough about illness to understand that they were in no danger. Even today, families, friends, and co-workers of people with cancer sometimes shy away from them when they learn about the disease. As a result, people with cancer often say they feel isolated and alone. You don't have to stay away from someone with cancer -- you cannot catch it from them. In fact, that person could probably use your company more than ever.

## Is cancer caused by stress?

Many studies have looked for a link between personality, stress, and cancer. Careful reviews of scientific evidence do not show that someone's personality can increase their cancer risk. Study findings do not always agree, but the feeling of being stressed does not

appear to be a strong predictor of cancer. Major life stressors, such as divorce or the death of a loved one, may raise cancer risk slightly. Also, poverty is linked to higher cancer risk, but this may be more related to health behaviors and poor access to medical care than to poverty itself. Of interest, many studies have shown that people who are socially isolated are more likely to die of all causes, including cancer.

We do know that social support and practical help improve the quality of life of people with cancer, and in some cases prolong survival. These things also help people with cancer cope better with their diagnosis, treatment, and recovery. If one of your co-workers has cancer, offering your help and emotional support is a key step toward helping that person manage the effects of their cancer.

## Does cancer always cause pain?

Pain is one of the reasons people fear cancer. If someone you know has cancer, it is normal to be worried about seeing him or her in pain. But there are some cancers which cause no physical pain at all. When a person with cancer does have pain it can be caused by a number of things. Some people have pain because of the growth of the tumor or as a result of advanced cancer, while others may have pain from surgery or the side effects of treatment.

You should also know that the cancer care team can treat and manage almost any kind of pain. A great deal of progress has been made in pain control, so pain can be reduced or relieved in almost all cases. Even patients with advanced disease can be kept comfortable.

If you work with someone being treated for cancer pain, you may also wonder if they will become addicted to the pain medicine. But the evidence shows that people who take prescribed drugs for cancer pain in general do not become addicted. For more on this, please see *Pain Control: A Guide for Those With Cancer and Their Loved Ones*.

## Do you always die if you have cancer?

No, but this the major reason people fear cancer. The most recent available data shows that 60% of people diagnosed with cancer are still alive 10 years later. Among those who are not cured of cancer, many can go on living for some years, even though there will be changes in their lives. For these people, cancer is a lot like diabetes or heart disease -- a chronic illness that is mostly controlled with treatment.

If someone you work with has cancer, it's important for you to know that cancer is not a death sentence. If you believe that they are beyond hope or help, you may not offer them your support. The truth is that they may be living with a disease that can be treated. Keep in mind that cancer is often treatable, and even curable. This will help you focus on supporting that person as they learn to live with cancer. So remember the good news: there are more than 11 million Americans alive today who have had cancer, and the survival rate is improving all the time.

## What are the different types of cancer treatment?

If someone you work with is being treated for cancer, you may want to learn more about what they are going through. Surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation are the main types of cancer treatment.

Surgery is often the first treatment option if the tumor can be taken out of the body. Sometimes only part of the tumor can be removed. Radiation, chemotherapy, or both might be used to shrink the tumor before or after surgery. For more on this, please see our document, *Surgery*.

Doctors use chemotherapy to kill cancer cells. The term chemotherapy (often shortened to "chemo") refers to the use of drugs to kill cancer cells. Usually, the drugs are given intravenously (into a vein, IV) or taken by mouth. Chemo drugs then travel through the body in the bloodstream, reaching cancer cells that may have spread (*metastasized*) from the tumor to other places in the body. For more about this, please see *Understanding Chemotherapy: A Guide for Patients and Families*.

Radiation therapy uses high energy rays (such as x-rays) to kill cancer cells and shrink tumors. The radiation may come from outside the body (external radiation) or from radioactive materials put right into the tumor (internal or implant radiation). Getting external radiation is much like getting an x-ray. The radiation itself is painless, but tissue damage may cause side effects. For more information, please see our document, *Understanding Radiation Therapy: A Guide for Patients and Families*.

Other, newer kinds of treatment you might hear about include hormone therapy, stem cell or bone marrow transplant, immunotherapy, and targeted therapy. Hormone therapy is sometimes used to treat certain kinds of prostate and breast cancers. Immunotherapy is treatment that can boost the cancer patient's own immune system to help fight the cancer. Targeted therapy is treatment that targets the cancer cells and causes less damage to healthy cells. Please call us or visit our Web site if you would like to learn more about these types of cancer treatment.

You might know someone else being treated for the same type of cancer, but don't assume that any two people will respond to treatment the same way. Each cancer is different, and each person's response to treatment is unique. It is best not to compare one person's treatment to another's.

## What are the side effects of cancer treatment?

The type of treatment a person gets will depend on the cancer type and stage (how far the cancer has spread), the age of the patient, and other medical problems and treatments the person has had. Each drug or treatment plan has different side effects. It is hard to predict what side effects will happen, even when patients get the same treatment. Some effects can be bad and others fairly mild. Some people have a tough time with cancer treatment, but there are also many who manage quite well and are able to work during treatment. But sometimes working during treatment requires changing work schedules, since many cancer treatments are only given during the day.

## **Chemotherapy side effects**

Short-term (and often treatable) side effects of chemo can include nausea and vomiting, loss of appetite, hair loss, and mouth sores. Because chemo can damage the blood-producing cells of the bone marrow, patients may have low blood cell counts. Low blood counts can cause certain side effects, such as:

- Higher risk of infection (due to a shortage of white blood cells)
- Serious bleeding or bruising after cuts or injuries (due to a shortage of blood platelets)
- Tiredness or fatigue (sometimes due to low red blood cell counts)

For these reasons, cancer care teams watch for and manage chemo side effects carefully.

Because everyone's body is a bit different, people notice different effects from chemo. Most of the side effects of chemo will go away after treatment ends. For instance, hair lost during treatment nearly always grows back after treatment. In the meantime, most patients are able to use wigs, scarves, or hats to cover, warm, or protect their heads.

## **Radiation therapy side effects**

Radiation treatments are much like x-rays and are not painful. The most common side effects are skin irritation and severe tiredness (fatigue). Fatigue is especially common when treatments go on for several weeks. It is a feeling of extreme tiredness and low energy which often does not get better with rest. People also report fatigue caused by the daily trips to the hospital to get their radiation treatments.

Many people work throughout the course of their radiation treatments, though it is common for them to adjust their schedules or work fewer hours until they feel better. Sometimes people are not able to keep working during treatment because of the extreme fatigue or other side effects. One of the most important things you can do for a co-worker with cancer is to help them maintain a flexible schedule. Cancer treatment and its side effects can be unpredictable; expect your co-worker to have good days and bad days.

## **Is cancer treatment worse than cancer?**

This is a common myth that can shorten lives. People who believe that cancer treatment is worse than cancer itself might not follow through with treatments that can prolong life or even cure their cancer.

It is easy to understand the source of this myth. Often people diagnosed with cancer have never had any symptoms or pain. For others, the symptoms have just started and are not too bad yet. But once the treatment starts, they often begin to feel pretty sick. It is true that chemo, radiation, and surgery can cause distressing and sometimes serious side effects. But most of them can be treated and will go away after treatment ends, and cancer treatment can be life-saving.

There are times when every cancer patient questions their commitment to the difficult journey of treatment and its side effects. Sometimes they can get discouraged by the uncertainty of treatment, and wonder if it's worth it. This is normal. It may help to remember that every year cancer treatments get more and more effective, and doctors keep learning better ways to control treatment side effects.

## What to expect

### Will the person with cancer have physical changes?

There are some common physical changes shared by many cancer patients. The cancer itself causes some of these changes, and others are the result of side effects of cancer treatment. Keep in mind that each cancer journey is different. Your co-worker may or may not have any of the following:

- Hair loss, including eyebrows and eyelashes
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Appetite loss or increase
- Changes in how things taste or smell
- Extreme tiredness called fatigue (more information follows)
- Pale skin and lips, or changes in skin color
- Disfigurement (for example, the loss of a limb or a breast after cancer surgery)
- Nausea and vomiting
- Problems with sleep
- Poor concentration

For many cancer patients, the hardest side effect to deal with is fatigue. People report that fatigue can be overwhelming, and they are surprised at how tired they can feel long after treatment ends. It can take a long time to heal after surgery, and people can have fatigue for months after an operation. Chemotherapy can involve many weeks of strong medicines that worsen fatigue as the body heals. People getting radiation treatment often also report extreme fatigue. Your co-worker may be experiencing stress and emotional concerns too, which add to exhaustion. Fatigue can go on for months after the person returns to work.

### How will my co-worker's emotions be affected?

Each person reacts in his or her own way to cancer and its treatment. It is normal to feel sad and grieve over the changes that a cancer diagnosis brings. The person's mood and

emotions can change from day to day, even from hour to hour. This is normal. A person with cancer may go through any or all of the following emotions and thoughts:

- A sense of lack of control
- Uncertainty
- Anger
- Sadness
- Fear
- Guilt
- Frustration
- Mood swings
- Much stronger and more intense feelings
- A sense of being disconnected or isolated from others
- Loneliness
- Resentment

Over time, the person may discover some changes that are good:

- A greater sense of resilience or strength
- Peace, or a feeling of being at ease
- A clearer idea of their priorities in life
- More appreciation for their quality of life and the people they care about

Cancer can be unpredictable. Someone with cancer can feel good one day and terrible the next. Expect that your co-worker will have good days and bad days. Learning to live with uncertainty is part of learning to live with cancer, both for the patient and for the people around them.

There may be times when the uncertainty and the fear cause your co-worker to seem angry, depressed, or withdrawn. This is normal and is a part of the process of grieving. Most people are able to slowly adjust to the new reality in their lives and go forward. Some may need to have extra help from a support group or a mental health professional to learn to deal with the changes cancer has brought into their lives. For more on this, please see *Anxiety, Fear, and Depression*. You can read it online at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org), or call us for a copy.

## How do people cope with cancer?

People develop all kinds of coping styles during their lives. Some people are quite private, while others are more open and talk about their feelings. These coping styles help people manage difficult personal situations, although some styles work better than others. Some people use humor and find it to be a relief from the serious nature of the illness. But some may become withdrawn and isolated from family and friends. A cancer diagnosis creates a lot of change. People often try to maintain as much control as they can in order to feel more secure. Some people become very angry or sad. They might be grieving the loss of their own healthy self-image, or the loss of control over their own lives.

Some people find it helps to simply be hopeful and do what they can to maintain that hope. Hope means different things to different people. And people can hope for many things while facing cancer.

You might assume that someone who is positive and optimistic must be denying the fact that they have cancer. If your co-worker seems upbeat and unaffected by having cancer, don't assume he or she is in denial. Making the most of every day may simply be their way of coping. As long as they are getting medical care, they are probably not in denial and their way of coping should be respected. For more information, see *A Message of Hope: Coping With Cancer in Everyday Life*.

## How important is work to the co-worker with cancer?

Facing cancer often brings with it an increased sense of the importance of work in a person's life. Work can boost self-worth and help the person focus on what they are able to do rather than on their illness. Work can be a safe haven away from the medical world and can help a person balance the feeling of being out of control. Work is also a source of stability because it has a routine and is familiar. And work provides contact with other people. Cancer can be isolating, and being around people can be a great comfort. It may be very important for your co-worker to be at work as much as possible and to be as productive as possible. Financial and insurance issues may also affect the decision to work during treatment.

## How can cancer affect a person's financial situation?

Cancer can cause money problems. The person may lose pay by being absent from work during and just after treatment. The worker's salary may drop if shorter hours are kept while the employee is getting treatment or is not feeling well. Employees may also need to pay more of their insurance premium if they work fewer hours or if they take time off for treatment. In some cases, health coverage may be stopped or decreased if they go to a part-time schedule. A lot depends on your workplace policies. It's important for the employee with cancer to understand how schedule changes affect their insurance, salary, and other benefits.

Frequent medical visits can also be a financial drain because of prescription costs and insurance co-payments (the part of treatment that insurance doesn't pay). These co-

payments can reach burdensome amounts. There are also parking fees, gasoline, and the full costs of other services and equipment not covered by insurance. The costs can add up very quickly.

## Ways to respond

### What should I say to my co-worker who has cancer?

You're not alone if you don't know what to say to someone who has cancer. It can be harder in the workplace because relationships with co-workers are so varied. You might not know the person very well, or you may have worked together for many years and be close friends. The most important thing you can do is to mention the situation in some way that feels comfortable for you. You can show interest and concern, you can express encouragement, or you can offer support. Sometimes the simplest expressions of concern are the most meaningful. And sometimes just listening is the most helpful thing you can do.

Respond from your heart. Here are some ideas:

- "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care."
- "I'm sorry to hear that you are going through this."
- "How are you doing?"
- "If you would like to talk about it, I am here."
- "Please let me know how I can help."
- "I'll keep you in my thoughts."

While it is good to be encouraging, it is also important not to show false optimism, or to tell your co-worker to always have a positive attitude. Doing so might make your co-worker think you are discounting very real fears, concerns, or sad feelings. It is also tempting to say that you know how the person feels. While you may know that this is a trying time, no one else can know exactly how any person with cancer feels.

Using humor can be an important way of coping. It can also be another source of support and encouragement. Let your co-worker take the lead; it is healthy if he or she finds something funny about a side effect, like hair loss or increased appetite, and you can certainly join in a good laugh. This can be a great way to relieve stress and to take a break from the more serious nature of the situation. But you would never want to joke unless you knew your co-worker could handle it and appreciate the humor.

When your colleague looks good, let him or her know! Avoid making comments when their appearance isn't as good, such as "You're looking pale," or "You've lost weight." It's very likely that they are acutely aware of it, and they may feel embarrassed if people comment on it at work.

It's usually best not to share stories with your co-worker about family members or friends who have had cancer. Everyone is different, and these stories may not be helpful. Instead, it is OK to let him or her know you are familiar with cancer because you've been through it with someone else. Then your co-worker can pick up the conversation from there.

## **What about confidentiality?**

Respect your co-worker's privacy. If your co-worker tells you about having cancer, you should never tell anyone else unless your co-worker has given you permission. Let them be the one to tell others about having cancer. If someone else asks you about it, you can say something like, "It's not up to me to discuss this, but I'm sure Ann will appreciate your concern. I'll let her know you asked about her."

It might feel awkward if you hear through the office grapevine that a co-worker has cancer. You could ask the person who told you if it is public information. If it is not, you probably shouldn't say anything to the person with cancer. But if it is public information, don't ignore it. You might say to your co-worker, in a caring way, "I heard what's happening, and I'm sorry."

You may feel angry or hurt if a co-worker who is close to you didn't share the news of a cancer diagnosis with you right away. No matter how close you are, it may take time for the person to adjust to the diagnosis and be ready to tell others. Don't take it personally. Focus on how you can support your co-worker now that you know. For more about this, please see our document *After Diagnosis: A Guide for Patients and Families*.

## **How do I overcome feeling uncomfortable around my co-worker who has cancer?**

Feeling sorry for them, or feeling guilty for being healthy yourself, are normal responses. But, by turning those feelings into offerings of support you make the feelings useful. Asking your co-worker how he or she wants or needs you to help can take away some of the awkwardness. Cancer is a scary disease, and it can create a great deal of uneasiness for people who don't have experience dealing with it. Don't be ashamed of your own fears or discomfort. Be honest with your co-worker about how you feel. You might find that talking about it is easier than you think.

You might be asked, or expected, to take on more work to make up for the absence of your co-worker. Discuss this with your supervisor if you think it could become a problem for you. Otherwise, you might begin to resent your co-worker. This will be an important part in overcoming the uneasiness you might feel in your co-worker's presence.

Remember to take care of yourself. If you are close in age to your co-worker, or if you are very fond of them, you may find that this experience creates anxiety for you. Cancer often reminds us of our own mortality. You might notice feelings somewhat like those of the person who has cancer: disbelief, sadness, uncertainty, anger, sleeplessness, and fears about your own health. If that is the case, you may want to get support for yourself from a

mental health professional or a local support group. If your company has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), you can contact a counselor that way. You can also use other sources of counseling, such as your health insurance or religious support services.

## **A list of basic do's and don'ts**

### **Do:**

- Take your cues from the person with cancer. Some people are very private while others will talk more about their illness. Respect the person's need to share or their need for privacy.
- Let them know that you care.
- Respect their decisions about how their cancer will be treated, even if you disagree.
- Include the person with cancer in usual work projects and social events. Let him or her be the one to tell you if the commitment is too much to manage.
- Listen without always feeling that you have to respond. Sometimes a caring listener is what the person needs the most.
- Expect your colleague to have good days and bad days, emotionally and physically.
- Keep your relationship as normal and balanced as possible. While greater patience and compassion are called for during times like these, your colleague should continue to respect your feelings, as you respect his or her feelings.
- Offer to help in concrete, specific ways (see ideas below).
- Check before doing something for your co-worker, no matter how helpful you think you are being.
- Keep them up-to-date with what's happening at work.
- Send cards, and include anecdotes about why they are missed. If people send individual cards, they may have more impact.

### **Don't:**

- Offer advice they don't ask for, or be judgmental.
- Assume that he or she can't do the job. Your co-worker needs to feel like a valuable, contributing member of your company or department.
- Feel you must put up with serious displays of temper or mood swings. You shouldn't accept disruptive or abusive behavior just because someone is ill.
- Take things too personally. It's normal for your co-worker to be quieter than usual, to need time alone, and to be angry at times.

- Be afraid to talk about the illness.
- Always feel you have to talk about cancer. Your colleague may enjoy conversations that don't involve the illness.
- Be afraid to hug or touch your friend if that was a part of your friendship before the illness.
- Be patronizing. (Try not to use a "How sick are you today?" tone when asking how he or she is doing.)
- Tell your co-worker, "I can imagine how you must feel," because you really can't.

## Offering support

### How can I be supportive?

Remember that your co-worker may find it hard to ask for help, or to appear vulnerable. Telling a person, "You're so brave" or "You're so strong" can put pressure on them to act strong when they may not feel up to it. Families can put subtle pressure on people with cancer by expecting or needing them to be strong all the time. In that case, you might play an important role for your co-worker. Your co-worker may know you well and trust you enough to confide in you, yet you don't have the emotional attachment and expectations of a family member. This kind of relationship can be a great gift for a person facing cancer.

It's human nature to distance yourself from someone when they become ill. Cancer can force us to look at our own fears about illness, weakness, or death. This may make us reluctant to interact with a co-worker facing cancer. But isolation can be a problem for people with cancer. Make an extra effort to reach out.

When your co-worker returns to work, you might want to welcome them back by leaving something on their desk such as a card, a cookie or muffin, a flower, or some other token to let them know people have missed them. It is certainly appropriate to invite your co-worker out to lunch when they return, either for a celebration, or just for a break from the routine. This may also serve as a signal that you are not uncomfortable around them.

If your co-worker needs medical equipment or money for treatment, you can look into getting something donated or organize a raffle to help raise money. Or you can simply take up a collection to buy something they need that might not be covered by insurance.

Your co-worker may look to you for advice regarding financial worries, work issues, or other concerns. Be honest. Help if you can, but if you feel uncomfortable, say so. There are many places a person can get help and support, and you might suggest that they seek the advice of a professional who is best suited to give that kind of guidance. For more information, please see our document, *Financial Guidance for Cancer Survivors and Their Families: How to Find a Financial Professional Sensitive to Cancer Issues*.

## What are some concrete ways I can help?

Communication is the key. Talk regularly with your co-worker about the best way to manage the workload and illness. You can encourage your colleague to maintain as normal a routine as possible, while protecting yourself from taking on a too-heavy workload by helping. Offer to help your co-worker set realistic expectations about work during the course of this illness. Keep treating him or her as normally as possible, including regular meetings, memos, and social events. If your colleague isn't up to doing something, let him or her make the decision to say no.

Ask your colleague what he or she could use; let them tell you what would be most helpful. Offer to help in specific ways, rather than saying, "Call me if I can help." Here are some suggestions:

- Send or prepare a meal. Arrange a schedule of meal delivery.
- Offer to help with child care. Arrange a schedule of day care pickups.
- Give your co-worker a ride to and from treatment appointments.
- Help run errands.
- Donate sick or vacation time.
- Offer to take their phone calls if they are feeling tired and need to rest.
- Offer to do some of their work during absences so work won't pile up.
- Appoint a person at work who can give information about how the person is doing and serve as the contact person for the staff in the workplace and the patient and family.
- Coordinate visits by groups from work, or coordinate sending cards, flowers, or gifts.
- Honor your colleague by making contributions to related charities, organizing blood drives, or making special efforts in his or her name.
- Offer to do some research on their unanswered cancer questions, or refer them to the American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345.
- If the person agrees, plan a party when treatment is finished, or at anniversary dates. Always check with the person before making party plans, including showing them the list of those to be invited.

## Are there resources available to help?

Employee assistance programs are a good resource for both the person with cancer and co-workers. If your co-worker seems to be very upset, you might suggest this as an option. The first few consultations may not cost much; in fact, sometimes they cost the employee nothing.

Cancer support groups are also an excellent resource for dealing with a cancer diagnosis and treatment. The American Cancer Society can refer you to groups in your area.

For other staff in your workplace, on-site support groups or education programs can help them manage stress and increase understanding. Even a meeting to focus on managing feelings and work issues can be very helpful. If you have stress management resources or techniques in place, this is a good time to use them.

## **What supervisors can do**

### **What should I expect when an employee is diagnosed with cancer?**

Everyone handles an experience like cancer in a different way, depending on their personal coping style and the nature of their personal situation. What is true for one person may not be true for another. When dealing with an employee with cancer, keep these facts in mind:

- A diagnosis of cancer is not a death sentence. Today's treatments mean that many people are cured and lead valuable, productive lives for many years after diagnosis. Do not assume that a cancer diagnosis will end someone's career. In fact, in some cases people become energized to be more productive and effective after facing cancer.
- Many people can work their normal schedules while getting cancer treatment. On the other hand, some people may need more flexible schedules and extra time off. Because some people seem to function quite well even when they are having a difficult time, don't assume that requests for more time off are not legitimate. Have your employee work with the company's Human Resources department to set up sick time or Family and Medical Leave, if that is available in your workplace and the employee qualifies for it.

### **How do I set the tone in the workplace when an employee has cancer?**

Your employees will follow your lead, so it's important to learn the facts and be available to answer questions and concerns that other employees may have. But be sure to not violate confidences.

It is critical to keep the lines of communication open at all times. Allow the employee with cancer time to talk about it. If there is a problem with his or her work, don't ignore it. Talk about it constructively and try to offer solutions.

Above all, don't treat the employee with cancer differently than you treat other workers unless there is a clear medical reason to do so, or the employee has asked for special accommodations.

## What should I keep in mind when an employee is first diagnosed?

In some ways this is the hardest time for everyone. The surprise and shock following a diagnosis and the uncertainty about what to expect can make it hard for you, for the person with cancer, and for other employees, too.

During this time, it is important to focus on supporting your employee and on organizing ways to get work done, rather than on the employee's medical situation. Most likely, the person won't know yet what the course of treatment will be and what time and schedule demands it will make.

Assure your employee that you will make reasonable accommodations so that he or she is able to keep working. If you can, let your employee know that your door is always open if he or she has concerns to address with you.

If for any reason you feel that you won't be able to offer a listening ear, you can show your care and concern by helping to connect your employee to other sources of support such as the employee assistance program or a local cancer support group.

Refresh your knowledge about your company's policies concerning medical conditions and leave policies, including the Americans with Disabilities Act. Let the employee know about these policies, too. Your human resources department may be able to help. For more information about disability laws and special leave, please see our documents, *Americans With Disabilities Act: Information for People Facing Cancer* and *Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)*.

## What are the guidelines on confidentiality?

Keeping your employee's confidential information private is very important. Ask your employee if there are people he or she feels comfortable with knowing the diagnosis, and if it would be helpful for you as a manager to tell them the news. Respect the person's wishes; never tell anyone without permission, even if you think the employee will not mind. Always speak with your employee in a private area.

Take your cues from your employee. Ask questions, but be prepared to pull back if she or he seems reluctant to discuss anything. Ask what you can do to help, and be sure the employee knows that you respect the privacy of their medical information.

## When treatment begins, what should I expect?

Cancer is treated in many different ways. In-hospital treatment may mean the person has to take extended time off from work. Outpatient treatment may mean little or no change in the person's workload, or it may mean that work hours or duties need to be reduced.

Sometimes an employee won't know what's possible until after treatment has started. The person's capacity to work will depend on the type of treatment, response to the treatment, and the amount of support and help the employee has at home. Be as flexible as possible.

Decide together, and check in every now and then, to be sure you both agree on limits and realistic expectations.

As treatment progresses, the person's ability to handle various assignments or projects may change -- for better or for worse. Don't withhold challenging assignments because you think it will be too much of a strain. Ask the employee before holding back with or taking away difficult assignments.

## What if the employee isn't talking about what's going on?

Don't assume that because the employee is not complaining, treatment is not an issue. They may be "keeping a stiff upper lip." Offer encouragement and appreciation for the way they are handling things.

Don't be afraid to ask how the person is feeling, but remember to take your cues from the employee. If the employee does not want to talk about it, that must be respected as well.

## Are there steps I can take to make it easier for my employee facing cancer?

The following ideas might help you make things easier for an employee who is dealing with cancer. Different work settings may require other approaches, but the overriding principle is to ask and keep up with what is going on.

- Allow for flexible work hours, work from home, job sharing, and/or time off to keep treatment appointments.
- Arrange for a nearby parking space for the employee.
- Give the employee permission to rest when needed. Cancer treatment can reduce a person's energy level.
- If needed, teach other employees how to do parts of the person's job. Sometimes the person with cancer can be the one to teach his or her colleagues.
- Rearrange the workload so absences aren't too disruptive.
- Ask if the employee would be willing to let others do some of his or her work during absences.
- Let the employee make decisions over which they have control. People with cancer often feel a loss of control over many aspects of life. Making decisions, even simple choices, helps contribute to an overall feeling of being in control.

## How should I deal with other employees?

Keep the lines of communication open. Don't talk to others about the person's medical condition. That information is confidential. Do talk to other employees about work-related situations. How are the others managing to get the work done? Are they under

extra stress? Are there steps that you as a manager can take to make it easier for them to cope with the situation? Focus on helping co-workers address their concerns rather than talking about the person with cancer.

## **What about when treatment is over?**

If the employee took time off or had a reduced schedule, let him or her slowly make the transition back to full-time work hours. Remember to keep the lines of communication open. Ask if you can help with anything as their schedule and work load goes back to normal.

When the employee returns to a normal work schedule, the natural impulse is for colleagues and managers to breathe a sigh of relief and assume the rough patch is over. Although the stress of treatment is over, emotional stress lingers for a while, for both the employee and his or her co-workers. Sometimes fatigue can also go on for months after treatment has ended. It might help to let other employees know that the time after treatment can also be a challenge. Sometimes people with cancer feel even more vulnerable once the active phase of treatment is over.

Be alert for resentment from other employees. Now that the person feels better, others may express resentment about the extra work they had to do during the employee's treatment. Try to address this, rather than allowing it to simmer.

## **What if the cancer returns?**

In some cases, the cancer will come back (recur) and treatment will begin again. The employee may or may not react in the same way as the first time. Again, communication is the key. Many people are quite upset on learning their cancer is back. They may feel they don't have the emotional or physical reserves to fight again. Others seem to accept a recurrence more easily. They may have expected it, or are simply ready, for whatever reasons, to fight again. By equipping yourself with the knowledge of how best to talk to the person with cancer, you can be most helpful to them.

## **Your help is important**

There is a lot that you, as a supervisor or co-worker of someone facing cancer, can do to help. Work plays an important part in the lives of most people, and your help and understanding can make an important difference on the impact the illness has on your colleague. Communication and flexibility are the keys to success.

## **Additional resources**

### **More information from your American Cancer Society**

We have selected some related information that may also be helpful to you. These materials may be ordered from our toll-free number or found online at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).

Americans With Disabilities Act: Information for People Facing Cancer

Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)

What is COBRA? (also available in Spanish)

Financial Guidance for Cancer Survivors and Their Families: How to Find a Financial Professional Sensitive to Cancer Issues

Talking With Friends and Relatives About Your Cancer (also available in Spanish)

A Message of Hope: Coping With Cancer in Everyday Life (also available in Spanish)

After Diagnosis: A Guide for Patients and Families (also available in Spanish)

Attitudes and Cancer

Pain Control: A Guide for Those With Cancer and Their Loved Ones (also available in Spanish)

Anxiety, Fear, and Depression (also available in Spanish)

Understanding Chemotherapy: A Guide for Patients and Families (also available in Spanish)

Understanding Radiation Therapy: A Guide for Patients and Families (also available in Spanish)

Surgery (also available in Spanish)

Immunotherapy

Targeted Therapy

Bone Marrow and Peripheral Blood Stem Cell Transplant (also available in Spanish)

Caring for the Patient With Cancer at Home: A Guide for Patients and Families (also available in Spanish)

### **National organizations and Web sites\***

Along with the American Cancer Society, other sources of information and support include:

**Job Accommodation Network**

Toll-free number: 1-800-526-7234

TTY: 1-877-781-9403

Web site: [www.jan.wvu.edu](http://www.jan.wvu.edu)

This free service of the US Department of Labor offers information and ideas for supervisors and employees about accommodations for people with disabilities, including practical suggestions for the workplace

**Americans with Disabilities Act Information Line**

Toll-free number: 1-800-514-0301

TTY: 1-800-514-0383

Web site: [www.ada.gov](http://www.ada.gov)

Information on the legal rights of workers with disabilities under the ADA

**Cancer and Careers**

Telephone: 212-685-5955

Web site: [www.cancerandcareers.org](http://www.cancerandcareers.org)

A resource for working women with cancer and their employers; offers articles, news, charts, check lists, tips, and a community of experts, patients, and survivors.

**Cancer Legal Rights Center**

Toll-free number: 1-866-843-2572 (1-866-THE-CLRC)

TTY: 213-736-8310

Web site: [www.cancerlegalresourcecenter.org](http://www.cancerlegalresourcecenter.org)

A non-profit program that gives free and confidential information and resources on cancer-related legal issues to cancer survivors, their families, friends, employers, health care professionals, and others coping with cancer.

**US Department of Labor, Employee Benefits Security Administration (EBSA)**

Toll-free number: 1-866-444-3272 (1-866-444-EBSA)

Web site: [www.dol.gov/ebsa](http://www.dol.gov/ebsa)

Information on employee rights and benefits, including legal protections

**US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)**

Toll-free number: 1-800-669-4000

TTY: 1-800-669-6820

Web site: [www.eeoc.gov](http://www.eeoc.gov)

EEOC has a special document called *Questions and Answers about Cancer in the Workplace and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)*, available online at [www.eeoc.gov/facts/cancer.html](http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/cancer.html)

**National Cancer Institute**

Toll-free number: 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)

TTY: 1-800-332-8615

Web site: [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

Offers information about cancer and issues affecting the lives of cancer patients and their families

*\*Inclusion on this list does not imply endorsement by the American Cancer Society*

No matter who you are, we can help. Contact us anytime, day or night, for information and support. Call us at **1-800-227-2345** or visit [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).

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For additional assistance please contact your American Cancer Society  
1 · 800 · ACS-2345 or [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)