

CANCER IN THE WORKPLACE

Supervisor Tip Sheet

For supervisors of employees diagnosed with cancer, in treatment and beyond

When an employee has cancer, it can create stress, concern, sadness and uncertainty for the whole team.

Sometimes cancer is diagnosed suddenly without much warning. If this happens, you must be prepared to react with empathy and show support. Avoid telling stories about other people you know who have been diagnosed and focus on the employee sharing her or his diagnosis.

Cancer is a serious illness, but with additional support and time off, some people can work during their treatment. Others find that they need more rest or feel too sick to do as much and may need to take a leave of absence.



GETTING THE NEWS

When an employee notifies you that she or he has been diagnosed with cancer, focus on ways to support your employee and respect her or his privacy.



KEEP THE NEWS CONFIDENTIAL AND LIMIT DETAILED DISCUSSIONS OF YOUR EMPLOYEE'S MEDICAL SITUATION

Unless the employee has told you that it is OK to share the diagnosis with co-workers, do not tell anyone but your human resources (HR) department. Each employee will decide what she or he is comfortable sharing with their supervisor and colleagues.



LEAN ON YOUR HR COLLEAGUES

HR will coordinate benefits, freeing you up to focus on managing the team's work. HR also should be able to suggest programs, resources and policies to help employees with cancer.



DURING TREATMENT: SUPPORTING YOUR EMPLOYEE WITH CANCER

CONNECT YOUR EMPLOYEE TO HELPFUL RESOURCES

Talk with the HR department about offerings available to employees with cancer. Resources may include employee assistance programs, employee groups for people with cancer and survivors, and work flexibility policies.

Be flexible in scheduling. Adjust the employee's work schedule to help her or him make treatment a priority. Potential accommodations include:

- Creating a modified work schedule (e.g., part-time return to work);
- Allowing remote work, when possible;
- Restructuring job responsibilities or priorities to maintain productivity in tasks that are achievable for an employee in treatment; and
- Transferring the individual to a different position, but only if necessary and within the bounds of the law.



CONSIDER MAKING ACCOMMODATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

As your employee begins treatment, the kinds of support needed could change. For this reason, plan to review the individual’s needs periodically and make adjustments, as necessary.

Examples of accommodations may include:

- Offering a parking space closer to the office entrance;
- Providing more time to complete work and projects;
- Adjusting responsibilities by re-assigning tasks to other members of the team; and
- Making sure the office is accessible for people with disabilities.

HELP YOUR EMPLOYEE FEEL “NORMAL” AT WORK

Many people find that continuing to work while getting cancer treatment is a way to stay positive. In general, it can be a welcome break from thinking about cancer for the employee. Meeting with you about work-related matters may be a much-needed distraction. You don’t have to avoid the subject of cancer; instead, let your employee determine when to talk about it. For more information on how to have constructive conversations, see the American Cancer Society’s guide on [How to be a Friend to Someone with Cancer](#).

OFFER ONGOING SUPPORT THROUGH TREATMENT AND RECOVERY

People have different needs for support, as well as other preferences for help during cancer treatment. Ask each employee with cancer what approach would be most helpful.

ADDRESS TENSION OR STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Some employees on your team may find managing additional responsibilities stressful. As the supervisor or team leader, encourage a positive environment and be attentive to the health of the team by:

- Offering employee assistance resources to team members who report feeling stressed;
- Recognizing the employees who take on extra responsibilities while a colleague receives cancer treatment and giving positive feedback to the team for their support; and
- Maintaining an “open door” policy to create space for staff to talk about concerns.



COMPLYING WITH EMPLOYMENT LAW

As a supervisor, it is helpful to have a basic understanding of a few laws that govern what you can and cannot do when an employee has cancer. When employees have specific questions about leave, accommodations and other legal protections, contact HR, which has expertise in these areas.

REVIEW THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (ADA) REQUIREMENTS

This law helps protect the rights of people with disabilities and might apply to some employees during and after cancer treatment.

UNDERSTAND HOW THE FAMILY MEDICAL LEAVE ACT (FMLA) WILL PROTECT EMPLOYEES WITH CANCER WHEN THEY NEED TO TAKE TIME OFF FROM WORK

Many states and the District of Columbia have additional protections for workers you should be aware of. Note that these protections vary from state to state.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

American Cancer Society:

www.cancer.org or 1-800-227-2345

National Business Group on Health:

www.businessgrouphealth.org or 202-558-3000

The Jobs Accommodations Network (JAN):

<http://askjan.org/>

Americans with Disabilities Act: A Brief Overview:

<https://askjan.org/links/adasummary.htm>

FMLA Laws by State: <http://www.employmentlawhq.com/state-by-state-map.html>

