



Supporting employees with cancer

Best practices for employers



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A cancer diagnosis is one of the most challenging things a person can face. In addition to the obvious physical effects, cancer can affect a person's mental health, energy, productivity, friends, family and coworkers.

The American Cancer Society estimates that over 1.9 million new cancer cases will be diagnosed in the U.S. in 2023.¹ It's a condition that directly or indirectly affects millions of people every day.

Employers face challenges of their own when assisting employees with cancer. While sympathy and concern for a sick employee is always the top priority, employers must also contend with absenteeism and the emotional and psychological toll of a sick coworker and friend. As an employer or HR professional, how can you best support employees with cancer diagnoses and manage your benefits efficiently?

Supporting the employee

A cancer diagnosis is often overwhelming for both the individual facing it and their loved ones. According to a 2022 Symetra survey, cancer is the most-feared medical condition keeping people up at night. Worries about finances and the ability to work only add to the stress. Support from HR, supervisors and coworkers can go a long way in removing some of the work-related stress that cancer patients face.

Help navigate company policies

Employees may first look to an HR representative for help navigating their health coverage.² Remaining well-versed in company policies relating to the following will allow you to better assist employees.

- Short-term disability
- Long-term disability
- Flexible work
- Leaves of absence

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A cancer diagnosis impacts so many people

—the patient, their families, coworkers and friends. Be sensitive to the mental, physical and emotional toll the disease can take on everyone involved.

Understand benefits coverage

Understand which treatments employees may be considering, what benefits they've enrolled in through your company, and how your medical and/or other insurance plans may pay for these services to help avoid confusion or misunderstanding about what's covered and what's not. It may even be helpful to have these documents ready to share with a designated spouse, partner or other caregiver. When appropriate, direct employees to contact their health plan for additional assistance.

Recognize the emotional impact

A cancer diagnosis impacts so many people—the patient, their families, coworkers and friends. Be sensitive to the mental, physical and emotional toll the disease can take on everyone involved. While it can feel helpful to relate with personal stories, don't offer medical advice or share information about other people who've had cancer. Instead, connect the employee to specialized resources in your company or their community.²

These steps will help ensure that employees receive the support they need to focus on a successful outcome and hopefully reduce concerns over the financial impact and stress of being away from work.

Returning to work

A cancer patient's ability to return to work is essential for both financial purposes and the sense of normalcy and belonging that work provides. To help ensure a return to work during and after cancer treatment is successful, employers may consider taking some of these proactive steps:

- Connect with employees throughout their leave of absence to ensure they are using all available benefits and feel reassured of their ability to return.
- Offer modifications to job responsibilities so they can avoid physically taxing work, travel, and exposure to other potential illnesses.
- Provide a graduated return from part-time to full-time work so their energy and confidence can return.
- Allow flexible scheduling and/or work-from-home options to accommodate frequent medical appointments.
- Communicate frequently to ensure employees feel accommodated and are not overwhelmed physically or emotionally.

When considering and implementing these steps, be mindful of the legal requirements for accommodating employee sicknesses and leaves of absence.



While making accommodations

to support a return to work, employers must be careful to protect the employee's privacy and not disclose more than they are legally permitted.

Communication is key

Communication is essential for both the returning employee and for others in the organization. While coworkers in close-knit departments or organizations may know about a coworker's sickness and will be justifiably concerned, the employer must be careful to protect the employee's privacy and not disclose more than they are legally permitted. This can create challenges when providing accommodations for a returning employee such as flexible scheduling, closer parking or frequent time off that could be misconstrued as "special treatment."

You can help concerned employees by explaining why accommodations are occasionally necessary without providing details on an employee's specific condition.

Best practices

Supporting recovering cancer patients as they come back to work can be complicated, but a successful return can be rewarding for both the employee and the organization. Here are a few final tips to help reduce the impact of cancer in the workplace.

- Offer cancer awareness materials and on-site screenings as part of an annual health fair or the benefits enrollment process. This can encourage employees to access preventive care they might otherwise go without and promote early detection.
- Provide an employee assistance program (EAP) that includes access to professionals who can help employees understand and use their benefits, and offers financial guidance, counseling and other resources to support an employee's return to work.
- Proactively research potential barriers and solutions for employees returning to work from cancer or other illness treatments.
- Be sympathetic to coworkers who may be absorbing additional workloads while an employee is absent or gradually returning to full-time work.

These and other steps can help ensure an employee's return to work is positive and productive for all affected parties. Visit these valuable resources for additional information.

www.cancer.org | www.cancerandcareers.org | www.cancer.gov

To learn more, contact your group benefits representative.



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¹ "Cancer Facts & Figures 2023," American Cancer Society, accessed March 10, 2023, <https://www.cancer.org/content/dam/cancer-org/research/cancer-facts-and-statistics/annual-cancer-facts-and-figures/2023/2023-cancer-facts-and-figures.pdf>.

² "How to support an employee with cancer," Kaiser Permanente, August 30, 2022, <https://business.kaiserpermanente.org/insights/specialty-care/support-employee-with-cancer>.