

First Steps for the Newly Diagnosed: The Cancer Survival Toolbox

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[Karen]

When I found out I had cancer, my first thought was “I’m going to lose my job”. Then I thought “Oh no, my health insurance!” I had just started my job four months before, and didn’t know how my boss would react to the news that I might need time off.

[Narrator]

When, how, and what you tell your employer is a personal decision. Before you talk to him or her, ask your doctor how your treatment and recovery will affect your ability to do your job, including whether you will need to take time off, and if and when you might expect to return to your “before cancer” work status.

If you need to take time off for treatment, you’ll probably need to think about telling your employer about your diagnosis. Your employer may ask:

- If you’ll be able to continue working
- Whether you’ll be able to continue to do your job as well as before you were diagnosed with cancer
- If you’re taking time off for treatment, whether you’re planning to return

If you believe talking with your employer will cause problems, it may be helpful to talk to a social worker at your cancer center. He or she may be able to help things go more smoothly.

There are federal laws and regulations that may help you and protect your rights while in treatment. The Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, can protect you if you look for a new job. An employer cannot make you take a medical exam before you’re hired. After you’re hired, they can ask medical questions only if they relate to your ability to do your job. Provisions in the Family and Medical Leave Act require that businesses with more than 50 employees allow employees up to twelve weeks of unpaid time off for treatment.

Most employers try to work around their employees’ treatments. Still, it’s a good idea to keep a record of talks with your employer and people in the human resources or benefits office. Also, keep copies of performance reviews, memos, and letters regarding your employment.

Legal assistance is available if you feel you are being treated unfairly at work. The NCCS publication, *Working It Out: Your Employment Rights as a Cancer Survivor*, is available free online and reviews legal rights, ways to avoid discrimination, discrimination laws, and enforcement of legal rights. Access information is available in the online Resource Booklet.