



BC Cancer Agency

CARE & RESEARCH

An agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority

Returning to Work: Things to Consider

Often when you are recovering from treatment, it is hard to imagine how you are going to cope when you return to work. It is important to remember that you are recovering from treatment and how you feel now may be different than how you feel in the next days, week and months. However, knowing a little more information about what steps you can take might help you feel more in control of the situation.

Talk to Your Doctor (Oncologist)

Generally, your oncologist has had years of experience with understanding the impact of cancer and cancer treatment and recovery, and they can be helpful to you in estimating a reasonable timeframe for your return to work. However, you are unique and your recovery might vary from the oncologist's experience, so explain to your oncologist what some of the challenges you are having and how you think this might impact your ability to work. This is especially important if you are getting close to what the oncologist estimates as the average recovery time and you don't feel you are ready. Keeping your oncologist informed of your individual situation is good for two reasons. Firstly, the oncologist might be asked by funding sources (i.e. social assistance, long term disability plans, etc.) to provide an opinion on your readiness and they need to be aware of the challenges you have and the particular demands of your job in order to write informed recommendations for return-to-work. Secondly, if the timing of your recovery is not what they expected, it might be helpful for them to know so they might intervene. For example, fatigue is one of the most common side-effects of treatment and usually resolves itself. If it does not, it is important for your doctor to know so that you may be properly assessed and treated.

Take control over your own rehabilitation plan

If you feel you are not physically ready to return to work, ask your doctor if it is worth participating in an exercise program. If you are getting close to a return-to-work date, check with your doctor whether you can start replicating your workday routine. Get up at the same time of the workday, do similar duties around home to bring up your overall physical conditioning level. If fatigue is a concern, plan for ways to conserve your energy by scheduling rest breaks, or scheduling high demand duties in times when you know you have higher energy levels. It is *very* important to be realistic and patient with yourself around coping with fatigue.

If you feel that you are not emotionally ready to return to work, use the time off to connect with a counselor to learn better coping skills, i.e. relaxation exercises, cognitive behavioral therapy, time management, assertiveness skills etc. Seek out counseling support if feelings of depression, low self esteem and anxiety persist. If you are having problems with your thinking and memory skills, know that this can be side effect of treatment that is often temporary and plan to implement strategies to deal with this, rather than putting pressure on yourself to be perfect.

Investigate the possibilities at your workplace.

It is likely that you are not the first person that has had to return to your workplace after an illness or injury and therefore it would be helpful for you to know how your employer has handled this issue in the past. Your union representative, human resources specialist, occupational health nurse or supervisor may be able to guide you. You don't necessarily have to provide them with an exact date of return because you may not know, but you could consider asking them about any return-to-work provisions that may be in place for when you are ready to come back.

Many cancer patients have a graduated return-to-work plan. Even in sedentary jobs, people can become "de-conditioned" to working after having a period of time off. If you have experienced cancer and had cancer treatment, this can cause further de-conditioning. In many cases, a gradual easing back to work can be helpful in slowly re-building your work-conditioning level. In some cases, particularly individuals who have physically demanding jobs, "work hardening" programs (typically funded by insurers) exist to help individuals resume their work readiness. It might be helpful for you to know what your employer's

expectations are for you upon your return-to-work, and the length of time that they have allowed for your graduated return-to-work plan. Consider asking if there are any opportunities to do different types of duties, if you can't resume your old ones right away, or if they will be able to accommodate any special needs that you have. It never hurts for your employer to know you want your job back. Consider keeping in touch with your workplace during your time off, as this may help with the transition of your return when you are ready to come back.

Know your rights and responsibilities

In Canada there is Human Rights legislation to support you regarding your return-to-work, for example having a job held for you, and providing accommodations for any disability you might have. The B.C. Human Rights Coalition can be a good resource in providing you with information on your rights and responsibilities. Not all employers know their legal responsibilities. Ideally you want to carefully negotiate your rights so that a positive relationship with your employer remains to ensure a comfortable working environment when you return. Knowing your rights and responsibilities may help you feel more confident and in control by having an action plan in place should you need it.

Know your insurance plan

Some insurance plans, i.e. Long-term Disability (LTD), or Canada Pension Plan (CPP) Disability, etc., may have provisions for work rehabilitation. Depending on the plan, they may be able to top up your wages if you return on a graduated return-to-work basis, or to provide re-training if you can't return to your old job. Typically, insurance companies will ask questions such as:

- Can you go back to your old job?
- Can your old job be modified?
- Can you move into another job with your company?
- Can you be trained to do a different job in your company?
- Can you trained or rehabilitated to do another job?

Then they might consider if you can be re-trained to do something else if no job is currently available that you can do. If re-training is an option, they might pay for this if it is cost-effective for them to do so. Not all insurance plans are the same, and it is important to know how they work and what they provide. Not all long term disability plans provide funding for training. The criteria for receiving benefits can vary and many long term disability plans have "own occupation" or "any occupation" criteria. "Own occupation" can mean that you remain unable do *your job* due to disability and this criteria can be time-limited (for example for two years). "Any occupation" can mean that you are unable to do *any job* that you are qualified or trained to do. Especially if it looks like you will not be able to return to work, investigating your options early on will give you the ability to plan your next steps. Don't hesitate to speak with your human resources and union representative if you're not sure about your company's insurance plan. Some long disability companies have vocational rehabilitation consultants who are available to facilitate your return to work.

Know Government Employment Programs

As mentioned above, CPP Disability has some provisions for vocational rehabilitation, and if you have collected Employment Insurance (EI) in the past few years you might find career-exploration, job-search instruction and/or funding for training. This is especially true if it looks like you will have difficulty finding work with your current skill set. EI programs might also be available even if you have not collected over the past few years, but this can vary. The B.C. Government provides vocational rehabilitation (Employment Program for Persons with Disabilities) if you have been considered permanently disabled and not receiving other insurance support and therefore it is worth checking this out to see if you qualify.

Many cancer patients manage to return to work successfully. . If you have questions or concerns, or are experiencing difficulties with your return to work planning, please feel free to contact me and we can discuss the options available to you.

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