

# Returning to School After Cancer Treatment

## For Adolescents & Young Adults

Having a diagnosis of cancer can be overwhelming, and encountering it during your teen or early adult years can be doubly challenging. School may have been a huge part of your life before cancer diagnosis, but you may have had to take significant time off school or defer your studies to focus on cancer treatment. Now that treatment is over, you may feel a sense of relief but at the same time, your feelings, priorities and routines may change as you adjust back to life after treatment.



You may be looking forward or feeling excited about returning to school, or you may choose to have a short break before resuming with your education. Nevertheless, there may be some common concerns you may have, including:

- Being able to keep up with class
- Handling changes in friendships after your long absence
- Whether or not to tell others about your cancer experience, and how to do it
- Handling reactions of others to your absence, cancer diagnosis or changed appearance (e.g. hair loss)
- Whether you will be able to fit in again with the rest of the class
- Studying while coping with unresolved treatment side effects (e.g. feeling tired more easily, being unable to concentrate)
- Feeling worried that cancer might come back



Despite these hurdles and uncertainties, going back to school as early as possible is definitely helpful. School can give you something to focus on, a sense of fulfilment, help you stay connected with your peers, and is essential in paving the way for your future and career.

If circumstances make it challenging to resume the path you had originally planned for, remember that there are many different options for education and work in today's world. If you are unsure on the route to take, speak to your friends, seniors, teachers or school counsellors for better clarity. Your interests, goals and priorities will help determine the most suitable option for you.

### **What you need to look out for**

Everyone copes with problems differently, but you may want to approach your healthcare team for advice if you experience any of the following:

- Feeling isolated and lonely in school or at home
- Feeling overwhelmed by school demands
- Finding that your school environment is competing with your medical needs
- Having difficulty adjusting to changes brought about by cancer and its treatment



## What you can do

Education equips you with essential life skills and is an avenue for better career options which ultimately allows you to be socially and financially independent. It also builds our character and helps us better understand the world around us. Although returning to school after cancer treatment can be challenging, it is an important part of moving on in your life after cancer.

Here are some tips to help you better adapt to returning to school:

<p><b>Keep up while on treatment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Keep in touch with your classmates and friends while on treatment via messaging, phone calls, video chats, emails or social media. Meet up occasionally if circumstances allow, and try to attend school events that you value</li><li>• Try to keep up with school work while on treatment, if you feel up to it. Ask your teacher or classmate if they can update you on what is covered in class, and get them to pass you notes or handouts periodically so it will be easier to adjust when you return</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Don't stress yourself out or try to take on too much</li></ul>
<p><b>Plan in advance</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Talk to your doctor to ensure you are well enough before returning to school. Check what follow ups are required, so you can plan to minimize disruptions when you return to school</li><li>• Inform your school in advance about your plans to return. Talk to them openly about your concerns and any support that may be required such as accessibility issues, need for more breaks or extra time during tests or examinations</li><li>• Consider going back to school for half days before returning full time to allow you time to adjust, if possible</li></ul>	

<p><b>When you return</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a buddy you can study, talk and hang out with. Meet a friend to come to school or walk into class together, especially on the first day</li> <li>• Check if it is possible to get extra classes to help you catch up with your schoolwork</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't forget the people who you met along your cancer journey. Keep in contact with them; they can be a great source of support</li> </ul>
<p><b>Coping with social interactions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decide in advance how much and with whom you are comfortable sharing about your situation. Let your teacher know if you prefer him/her to tell the class on your behalf, to reduce the chance of misinformation</li> <li>• Be prepared for questions. Plan what you want to say about your cancer. You may want to role play with someone you are comfortable with, about how to respond when situations arise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't force yourself to share or explain more than you are comfortable with. How open you are is a personal choice. Choose what is comfortable and feels right for you and your situation</li> <li>• Don't take it personally when someone makes an awkward or insensitive comment. If this is persistent or you are uncomfortable, speak to your teacher or school counsellor</li> </ul>
<p><b>Coping with emotions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be honest, it's okay to not feel okay all the time. Know that there may be good and bad days</li> <li>• Treat yourself to things you like, and do what you enjoy</li> <li>• Speak to your medical social worker or school counsellor if you need help with coping with your emotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't bottle up things. Share and speak to someone you trust about how you are feeling. Let them know if you need help or support. Keep a journal if you don't feel like talking</li> </ul>

### **Coping with physical changes or treatment side effects**

- Plan for more time to study and complete assignments. Have a daily to-do list and prioritize tasks. Break large tasks down into smaller, manageable chunks. Take regular breaks to help focus
- Use external aids such as notebook or mobile phone, to record things you need to remember and set alarms for appointments
- Check if there are any online courses or pre-recorded lectures or lessons so that you can review them later at your own pace
- Use a tablet or laptop instead, if writing is difficult due to numbness over your fingers
- Sit near the front of the classroom. Ask for extra time to get to classes if they are not held in the same venue
- Speak to your doctor or nurse if any treatment related side effects make it hard for you to keep up with school. He or she may refer you to a rehabilitation specialist for further help

- Don't expect your energy level to be the same as before. It is normal to feel tired more easily, especially in the beginning
- Don't overstrain yourself. Ask for help if you cannot cope with physical or strenuous tasks
- Don't multitask. Focus on one thing at a time

### **Coping with stress at school**

- Share your struggles with your friends/classmates, teacher or someone whom you trust. They can be great sources of support
- Communicate openly with your teacher. Let him / her know if you are unable to cope with assignments or deadlines and require any extensions

- Don't keep silent about your struggles in school
- Don't be embarrassed or afraid to voice your struggles at school to your teachers
- Don't expect too much too soon. Be patient with yourself and moderate your own expectations

## Coping with finances

- If finances is an issue, speak to your school or your medical social worker to find out some of the grants, bursaries or scholarships which you may be eligible for

## When to call your cancer care team

Please inform your doctor or nurse if you need any help adjusting with going back to school or need someone to talk to regarding any of the issues stated above.

If you are a patient with NCCS, you may also call **+65 6306 1777** or **+65 6436 8088** to book an appointment to speak to an NCCS medical social worker/ clinical psychologist.

If you have any questions regarding the above, please call the Cancer Helpline at **+65 6225 5655** or approach your doctor or nurse for further details.

## Cancer-specific Resources:

1. Singapore Cancer Society: Assistance for Children and Youths
2. Victoria State Government. Health and Human Services. Thinking Ahead, Your Guide to School, Study and Work. A guide for young people who have had cancer. (Australia)

## Programmes for Youths (General):

1. Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC): Developing Chinese students
2. Yayasan Mendaki: Programmes for Malay/Muslim Students
3. Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA ): Education for Indian students

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