

Returning to Work After Cancer Treatment



Should I return to work?

After cancer treatment has completed, you may find that you now have more time and energy to focus on other aspects of your life, such as your career. The decision about going back to work depends on many factors like your personal preference, physical condition, current age, as well as social and financial circumstances. There is no right or wrong answer; it is about finding what is best for yourself. Some choose to return to an existing job but others may choose to seek a new job or even consider retirement due to changes in capability or priorities.

Returning to an existing job

It is normal to feel nervous about returning after taking significant time off work while on cancer treatment. Some may find the transition to going back to work full time easy, but for many this may take time and adjustments, both mentally and physically.



A common concern is social interactions in the workplace, especially with regards to telling others about your prolonged absence. Planning ahead, being flexible and open communication are key in easing the transition back. Cancer treatments may also cause side effects, some of which take time to improve and may linger on for months or years after treatment has completed. Commonly encountered physical issues include tiredness , numbness in fingers and toes and difficulties in concentration and memory . Having a gradual return to work, small modifications to the environment or way you work, use of external aids and moderating expectations are some ways to help you cope.

Changing jobs or career switch

Having been through a major life-changing event such as cancer may cause you to have a new perspective and re-evaluate your priorities, values and goals in life. You may want to use this opportunity to have a new start or pursue something different. Or you may want to change to a job that is less stressful or more rewarding. Some points to think about when considering a career change include:

- What are my current skills and abilities?
- What are the available job opportunities that will match my current skills and abilities?
- Do I need to update my current education, skills and abilities? How do I get access to this training?
- Is there potential for growth in the new job?
- Will the new job or role be as stressful?
- Will I be able to handle the stress of change in employment?
- Will I be happy in the new job or role even though this may mean a lesser salary or a lower position?

Retirement

Some people may choose to retire early. Before choosing to give up work, you may need to re-evaluate your finances, needs and values towards work and reasons for not returning. Some of the things you should consider include:

- What do I enjoy about working? Is it meaningful to me?
- Are my current savings and financial situation able to sustain me and my family throughout retirement?
- What impact will (early) retirement have on my employment benefits (pension, medical insurance, sick leave etc.)?
- Can I adjust to life without work? How will I spend my time if I stop work?

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 at your workplace or at home
- Feeling overwhelmed by work demands
- Finding that your work environment is not supportive of your medical needs
- Having difficulty adjusting to changes brought about by cancer and its treatment

What you can do

Other than financial income, returning to work provides many benefits, which includes giving you a sense of purpose and normalcy, encouraging social interaction, as well as developing your knowledge and skills.

Here are some tips to help you better cope with returning to work after a cancer diagnosis:

Plan with your medical team

- Talk to your doctor before returning to work, especially if there is a need to assess whether you are able to carry out your usual tasks. Your doctor may refer you to see an occupational therapist, physiotherapist or rehabilitation specialist before you return to work
- Check your medical appointments beforehand so that you can plan ahead to minimize disruptions when you return to work

Plan with your workplace or employer

- Keep in regular contact with your colleagues or supervisors, so that you are connected and updated of happenings in your workplace
 - Inform your employer in advance about your plans to return to work. Talk openly about your concerns and any adjustments that may be needed, and agree on a feasible return-to-work plan. Be flexible and review it regularly. Set clear expectations about what is achievable
 - Start low, go slow. To minimize stress, consider options such as flexi-hours, working part-time, working from home or even a temporary role first to get back your momentum before slowly building up your working hours
 - Check with your human resource department about details of your benefits such as leave and health insurance coverage, or resources, programs and policies that can help you
- Don't feel pressured to accept all of your employer's demands. If you are unsure or uncomfortable, let them know that you need more time

<p>Prepare to return</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attend workshops or seminars to refresh your skills and knowledge if needed• Practise healthy lifestyle habits such as exercising, eating well, to improve your overall health status and maintain your energy levels	
<p>Interactions with colleagues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Decide in advance how much and with whom you are comfortable sharing about your situation• Have open communications about what you can or cannot do, so that others will know what to expect of you	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don't force yourself to share or explain more than what you are comfortable with. How open you are is a personal choice. Choose what is comfortable and feels right for you and your situation• Don't take it personally when someone makes an awkward or insensitive comment. Acknowledge the comment then redirect and turn the focus back to work
<p>Coping with fatigue at work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Re-organize your workspace so it is more comfortable and things are easily accessible• Schedule meetings according to when you have more energy. Take into account if you are still on medications and if their side effects can affect you• Take regular breaks and healthy snacks throughout the day to replenish your energy• Delegate other responsibilities (e.g. household chores) so that you can have more time to rest and preserve more energy for work	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don't expect your energy levels 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

<p>Coping with concentration at work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan your work. Have a daily to-do list and prioritize tasks. Break large tasks down into smaller, manageable chunks • Use external aids such as notebook or mobile phone, to record things you need to remember and set alarms for appointments • Assign a dedicated place for your things at work so that you can find them easily • Make sure you have enough sleep 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't multitask. Focus on one thing at a time
<p>Coping with stress at work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share your struggles with work colleagues whom you trust, if you are comfortable with it. They can be great sources of support • Be open with your supervisor. Let him / her know if you are unable to cope with work demands • Pace yourself with work demands. Ask for a change in responsibilities if your job is too demanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't overload yourself with more work than you can handle. Learn to say no • Don't expect too much too soon. Be patient with yourself and moderate your self-expectations

When to call your cancer care team

Please inform your doctor or nurse if you encounter issues or problems with returning to work after cancer treatment. 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.

Do note that you should not be refused employment due to your illness. If you think you are being treated unfairly, you may contact Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) for advice.

Useful Resources:

General Information about cancer and employment/work

1. Cancer and Careers

Career Guidance & Employment Placement Programs/Initiatives

1. SkillsFuture Singapore Agency/Workforce Singapore (WSG)
 - Programs & Initiatives
 - Career Matching Services
2. NTUC Employment and Employability Institute (e2i)
3. NTUC - Finding a job
4. Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC)
5. Mendaki Sense
 - Back-to-Work Women

Job Search/Networking Portals/Websites

1. MyCareersFuture Singapore
2. JobStreet
3. JobsCentral
4. ST Jobs
5. Indeed
6. Monster
7. LinkedIn

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