

Returning to Work or School After Cancer Diagnosis

# Returning to Work or School After Cancer Diagnosis

Learn about the different people who can help you return or stay at work or school after cancer.



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**Adapted from Cancer and Work Team, BC Cancer Centre**

Roles of professionals | Cancer and Work

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## Here to Help

There are many professionals available to support people in continuing to work during treatment or returning to work after cancer treatment. It can be difficult to know who all of the different professionals are and what role they play. We hope by explaining these roles, it will help you learn more about the different people you can ask to help you.

Within Cancer Care Alberta (CCA) and in the community, there are a number of different health care professionals that can help you with returning to work. You can use this document to read more about the professional roles you are interested in and those that may be more relevant to your care or your specific concerns.

## Workplace team

This section lists the workplace professionals who can help. Not all companies or employers will have all of these professionals. Smaller-sized employers may not have these professionals working within their company but may be able to consult people who can help.

### Human resources professional

As part of their job, human resources professionals manage the disability insurance claims of employees who are off work by:

- reviewing reports from their healthcare providers
- ensuring that all required forms are complete and filed
- keeping in touch with the worker throughout their recovery
- helping the employee safely return to work as soon as possible (commonly called Early and Safe Return to Work)
- coordinating the development of the return to work plan with everyone involved

After the employee is back on the job, the human resources professional monitors the progress of the return to work plan and coordinates any necessary changes.

## Return to work coordinator

Return to work coordinators help by talking with employers, insurers and employees while they are off work and when they are ready to return. They find programs and insurance benefits available to the employee. They help speed up the return to work process by:

- answering questions
- addressing concern
- creating a return to work plan
- and tracking progress to make sure the employee succeeds

## Occupational health nurse/advisor

Occupational health advisors are often nurses who are hired by employers as staff or consultants. They specialize in workplace health and can help employees with return to work. Occupational health nurses/advisors can help make the arrangements with the employer when the employee is ready to return to work after treatment, and recommend accommodations that will allow them to stay at work.

## Disability management professional

Disability managers work with employers to find alternative work that suits an employee's functional abilities, as defined by their healthcare team. They also:

- arrange accommodations and assistive devices that follow the recommendations of the employee's doctors
- help the employee's manager remove any barriers in the return to work process
- improve the administration of disability management by developing policies and procedures
- promote return to work through education and training

## Union representative

If an employee belongs to a union, a representative can provide them with valuable advice on their plan to return to work. Union officials also work with employers to find reasonable accommodation solutions for an employee with a disability or special consideration.

## Employee Assistance Program

An Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a confidential service offered by some employers. Services are usually offered through a third party to ensure confidentiality. Employees who have access to an EAP can access various services such as counselling, healthy living, nutrition support, family and career support, resources and guidance. Not all workplaces have EAP programs and not all programs offer the same services. Check with your employer to find out if you have access to an EAP.

## Cancer Care team

The roles in this section of the document focus on those team members that are a part of Cancer Care Alberta (CCA). For more information on the allied health specialists and how you can get referred to them, please refer to the [Alberta Referral Directory](#) and type either “Rehabilitation Oncology”, “Psychosocial Oncology” or “Nutrition Counselling Cancer” to find services closer to you.

The allied health team members can play an important role in assessing and addressing challenges in returning to work. They can also help the planning process for return to work and job maintenance. These specialists may be available within the healthcare system, in the community, in hospitals or clinics, or at some workplaces. They can be accessed by individuals or through extended healthcare benefits, private insurance providers or employers.

## Nutrition Counselling

### Dietitian

Registered Dietitians play a key role in the nutrition assessment, intervention, monitoring and evaluation of the cancer survivor. Nutrition interventions may include dysphagia management, diet modification, and education. Dietitians can help design individualized, patient centered care plans to optimize nutrition status and support symptom management. They can assist in identifying community resources that may help to provide further support during recovery.

## Psychosocial Oncology Team

### Neuropsychologist

A neuropsychologist is a psychologist trained in the assessment, treatment and prevention of behavioural and emotional conditions. Neuropsychologists focus on how injuries or illness of the brain affect mental functions, such as attention and memory.

They can provide:

- assessments of cognitive (thinking) strengths and challenges that might impact work performance
- education
- rehabilitation
- counselling related to changes in thinking abilities



- guidance on ways to help maintain or enhance functioning at work

Referral to a neuropsychologist can be very helpful to those whose work tasks require cognitive (mental) abilities.

## Psychologist

A psychologist is trained to understand mental, emotional and behavioural functioning. A psychologist may provide support to a person who is struggling with a cancer experience and can provide counselling to help with issues or concerns related to returning to work.

## Social Worker/Clinical Counsellor

Oncology Social Workers are trained and have experience in supporting people with cancer and their loved ones. Returning to work or school following cancer treatment is a vulnerable time for many; decision-making can feel scary or uncertain. Social Workers can help people clarify their thoughts and gain perspective on their cancer experience. They can also help by:

- talking, addressing concerns, and advocating as needed with returning to work or school
- helping people explore options and find resources and supports
- sharing information about services and making referrals that help with job loss, finances, disability, mobility issues and other vocational/educational concerns

## Spiritual Care Practitioner

Spiritual Care Practitioners work with patients to explore the underlying spiritual and emotional factors that may be impacting return to work processing and readiness. Counselling support is offered as a resource for a patient's self-exploration, decision making guidance, and rootedness in the individual's spiritual or religious values.

## Rehabilitation Oncology Team

### Occupational therapist

An occupational therapist (OT) assesses how a person's physical, mental and emotional health affects their ability to complete activities. They may:

- discuss job tasks and the patient's abilities

- help the employee rebuild their skills
- make recommendations for modifying job tasks, activities, routine, or environment
- suggest aids or assistive technology, if needed
- provide education to manage symptoms, such as fatigue or memory impairment

## Physiotherapist

A physiotherapist (PT) assesses a person's ability to move and maximize their quality of life through prevention and rehabilitation. Physiotherapists can help cancer survivors:

- regain movement of joints and muscles
- manage cancer-related swelling (lymphedema)
- reduce their pain and stiffness
- improve their endurance, strength and balance.

## Speech Language Pathologist

Speech-language pathologists (SLPs or speech therapists) assess and manage communication and swallowing problems. They can help people with:

- speaking
- word-finding
- swallowing challenges
- teaching strategies for eating safely

## CCA Medical Team

There are many healthcare professionals involved in a cancer patient's care, such as medical oncologists, radiation oncologists, surgical oncologists, family doctors, nurse practitioners, oncology nurses and psychiatrists. Patients, other healthcare providers, insurance providers and employers seek advice from healthcare providers on the patient's work abilities as well as their need for medical, rehabilitation and psychological care to improve work ability. Healthcare professionals also provide guidance on cancer symptoms and the effects treatment, assess work abilities, and recommend services and strategies to promote returning to and remaining at work.

## Medical oncologist

A medical oncologist is a doctor who specializes in using medications to treat cancer. This is also called systemic treatment, and may include chemotherapy, hormonal

therapy, biological therapy, targeted therapy or immunotherapy. Some oncologists specialize in one type of cancer, such as breast or lung. Medical oncologists prescribe cancer treatments and supportive medications to treat or prevent their side effects. They may also be part of teams doing research on experimental cancer drugs. Right now, there is little research on the effects of certain cancer treatments on work abilities. However, medical oncologists are able to estimate the short and long term impact that the therapies they prescribe can have on your capacity to return to work.

## Nurse

Registered nurses (RNs) and licensed practical nurses (LPNs) work with cancer patients to answer questions, monitor symptoms and side effects and provide support to patients and their families. Some registered nurses may be specially trained to provide chemotherapy treatments and support patients undergoing radiotherapy. Registered nurses are often the first line of communication between the patient and their healthcare team and can help address symptoms of cancer and treatment that might affect patients' work ability.

## Nurse practitioner

A nurse practitioner (NP) is a registered nurse with a Master of Nursing degree and additional training and education in physical assessment, diagnosis, and treatment. An NP can complete medical histories, perform physical examinations, order diagnostic tests and prescribe medications. NPs work with physicians and other members of the healthcare team to manage symptoms and treatment side effects. Like oncologists, nurse practitioners specializing in oncology have extended knowledge about cancer treatment and side effects and are qualified to provide guidance in symptom management to improve function at work.

## Pain and symptom management/palliative care doctors

Pain and symptom management/palliative care doctors focus on providing patients with relief from the symptoms, pain, and the physical and mental stress of a serious illness – whatever the diagnosis, including cancer. These doctors can offer symptom management and recommendations to help patients return to work after cancer treatment or stay at work for as long as possible during treatment. They also provide medical support throughout the course of treatment and beyond for both patients and their families or caregivers. Some cancer centres may have a Pain and Symptom Management team.

## Patient navigators (Registered Nurses)

Navigators are registered nurses who have specialized training and experience in cancer care. They are able to help with the physical, practical and emotional challenges that come with a cancer diagnosis. Navigators work out of community and regional cancer centers in order to support care closer to home. They help guide patients through tests, appointments and treatments. Navigators are available before, during and after treatment.

Patients between the ages of 17 and 39 can be referred to the **Adolescent and Young Adult patient navigator** for access to age appropriate information, supports and referrals. Patients who identify as Indigenous can be referred to the **Indigenous patient navigator** to connect to services, supports and resources, facilitate cultural practices and advocate for patients in a culturally sensitive way.

## Pharmacist

A pharmacist can provide guidance on the safe and effective use of medications. Pharmacists offer advice about drug selection, monitoring for side effects, avoiding drug interactions and assessing therapy outcomes. They can tell people how side effects or combinations of medications might affect the ability to function at work.

## Physiatrist

Physiatrists are medical doctors who have completed specialized training in physical medicine and rehabilitation. They assess a person's readiness for rehabilitation and other therapies, like Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy. Physiatrists focus their treatment on function by treating the whole person, not just one problem area. Patients seen by a physiatrist benefit from earlier identification and treatment of rehabilitation issues as a result of the cancer or its treatment.

Depending on a patient's problems or symptoms, physiatrists treat their patients using:

- electromyography (EMG) and nerve conduction studies
- corticosteroid joint injections, trigger point injections and botulinum toxin injections
- medication prescriptions
- functional or return to work recommendations

## Psychiatrist

Psychiatrists are medical doctors with additional training to assess persons with mental health issues, which may include anxiety, depression, traumatic stress responses and psychosis. Psychiatrists can:

- diagnose mental health disorders
- provide individual and group therapy
- prescribe psychiatric medication
- assess the link between psychological reactions and cancer and its treatment
- determine the effects of physical, mental, emotional and social (biopsychosocial) factors on work ability

## Radiation oncologist

Radiation oncologists are doctors who specialize in radiation to treat cancer, control the growth of cancer or relieve symptoms such as pain. Radiation oncologists work closely with medical oncologists, surgeons, and other doctors to plan their treatment and manage side effects that may occur due to radiation therapy. Radiation oncologists know about radiation effects through their clinical experience, and can estimate the effects radiation treatment can have on the ability to work.

## Surgical oncologist

Surgical oncologists (or cancer surgeons) are doctors who have additional training to diagnose, biopsy and surgically treat cancers of all types. They specialize in removing cancerous lesions, tumours and organs, as well as taking tissue samples to make a diagnosis. Surgeries like amputations, bone and joint resections and internal organ removal can greatly affect the ability to work. Other surgeries such as a colostomy, ileostomy, brain or neurological surgery can also affect work ability. Your surgeon can advise on recovery time and long-term limitations after surgery. If radiation or chemotherapy is needed after surgery, surgical, medical or radiation oncologists will advise on how those types of treatment affect the ability to work.

## Community Medical team

### Family doctor

Family doctors (general practitioners or GPs) play a key role in assessing, treating and addressing issues that may affect the cancer survivor's ability to work. Family doctors know about the survivor's cancer and its treatments, but are also aware of other health conditions they may have that may contribute to or prevent their cancer recovery.

### Ophthalmologist (Eye doctor)

An ophthalmologist is a doctor with specialized training for the eye and vision disorders. Neuro-ophthalmologists have specialized education and training in vision problems that come from diseases affecting the visual centres of the brain.

Ophthalmologists can assess vision, recommend glasses, and help coordinate referrals to vision services to improve function, such as the Canadian National Institute for the Blind or, in the case of brain injury, to neuro-rehabilitation.

### Otolaryngologist (Ear, nose and throat doctor)

An otolaryngologist is a doctor specialized in the medical and surgical treatment of disorders of the ear, nose and throat, as well as related structures of the head and neck. When cancers affect these areas, otolaryngologists can provide advice on adaptive aids for hearing or speech to help patients return to work or school.

### Neuropsychiatrist

Neuropsychiatrists specialize in treating people whose psychological problems are caused by neurological changes.

### Vocational rehabilitation counsellor

Vocational rehabilitation counsellors help people with health conditions like cancer or other disabilities manage their employment concerns. They can help cancer survivors get the rehabilitation, medical and psychological services they need to stay productive at work or improve their function so they can return to work. They can:

- assess work skills and abilities
- provide career counselling and recommend suitable kinds of work
- negotiate accommodations with employers
- teach people how to search for new jobs if they want to make a change

## Insurance team

### Adjudicator and Claims Manager

An adjudicator is a member of the claims team that handles short-term claims, usually up to 6 weeks. The Claims Manager usually handles more complex or longer-term claims. They will first confirm 3 things: (1) if the person has valid coverage; (2) the medical history for the condition is correctly documented on the file; and (3) determine if the treatment is appropriate. The adjudicator or claims manager will then:

- assess if the claimant is eligible for benefits under the policy
- discuss the policy conditions
- make payments on the claim (per the policy conditions). (Note: some employers take recommendations for payment from the Adjudicator and will pay their employees directly)
- monitor the file and track rehabilitation progress to assess when return to work might be possible
- assess if support would be appropriate from the Rehabilitation team at any time during the claim (the adjudicator is the contact for the employee, employer, treatment providers and rehabilitation team)

How long a term is, usually depends on the company's policies. If a term needs to be longer than 6 weeks or the case is complex, the claim may be passed to a Claims Manager.

### Rehabilitation Consultant

The scope of a rehabilitation consultant may be Vocational Rehabilitation, Functional Rehabilitation or both. These roles are not part of Cancer Care Alberta.

### Vocational Rehabilitation Consultant

A vocational rehabilitation consultant assists with job search efforts or training, if possible. They may assess the person's ability to get or hold a job.

## Functional Rehabilitation Specialist

A functional rehabilitation specialist may:

- assess an employee's work functioning
- make referrals to rehabilitation services
- consult with the employee's physician and employer to aid their return to work
- aid the employer and employee in identifying barriers to working or in developing vocational rehabilitation plans
- assist with return to work plans and with return to work transitions (this may include work facilitation meetings or ergonomic assessments)

## Insurance consultant

The insurance consultant is often the person who sold the insurance policy (typically short- and long-term disability or critical incident insurance) to the employer, union or professional association. These consultants are:

- familiar with the terms of the insurance contract
- can be helpful in interpreting, navigating or advocating for the employee or the employer if the insurance company is not meeting the terms of the contract.



## Community Resources and Programs

### Wellspring – Calgary

Returning to Work; Legal and Employment Matters; Money Matters; Resumes and Interviews

P: 1-866-682-3135

<https://wellspringcalgary.ca/>

### Wellspring – Edmonton

Return to Work; Resumes and Interviews; Workplace Program

P: 780-758-4433

<https://wellspring.ca/edmonton/>

### Alberta Cancer Exercise (ACE) Program

Exercise Program for Cancer Survivors

Edmonton

Calgary

P: 1-780-492-6007

P: 1-403-210-8482

Toll Free: 1-888-452-6875

<https://www.albertacancerexercise.com/>

### Alberta Healthy Living Program

Supervised Exercise Program, Minding Stress, Sleep Well.

Please select your Zone to determine which programs are available and access contact information.

<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/page13984.aspx>

### Bredin Centre for Career Advancement

Employment/Training/Housing/Loans

Edmonton, Spruce Grove, Red Deer and Calgary

<https://www.bredin.ca/>

### Cancer and Work

Cancer and Work is a Canadian website that shares many resources on returning to work after cancer. They have a section of the website for patients, employers and insurance providers.

[Cancer and Work |](#)

### Breast Cancer Supportive Care Clinic (Calgary)

Helps with return to work planning, strategies to reduce risk of recurrence, and strategies for living with a recurrence or other cancer related issues.

P: 1-403-270-2242 F: 1-403-270-2251 @: reception@breastcancersupportivecare.ca

<https://breastcancersupportivecare.ca/>