MetLife | Return to Health

Cancer Treatment and Ability to Work

Cancer treatment typically refers to chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and immunotherapy. These treatments are utilized in hopes to cure a cancer, shrink a cancer, or stop the progression of cancer. Not only can the cancer itself have an effect on a person's ability to work but the treatment can also affect their ability to work.[1]



Common forms of treatment include:

- **Chemotherapy** – Use of pharmacologic agents administered orally or intravenously.[1]
- **Radiation Therapy** – Use of high energyradiation to target and damage cancer cells.[1]
- **Immunotherapy** – Use of substances that help the body's immune system fight cancer.[1]

"As of January 2022, there were an estimated 18.1 million cancer survivors in the United States. The number of cancer survivors is projected to increase to 26 million by 2040.[6]"

Potential side effects of cancer treatment:

- **Chemotherapy** – General side effects can include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, fatigue, anemia, infection, mouth/throat sores, edema, and peripheral neuropathy. Side effects may be temporary during active treatment or permanent due to damage from chemotherapy.[3]
- **Radiation Therapy** – General radiation side effects usually begin 2-3 weeks into therapy and may last for 4-6 weeks post therapy. They may include itching, redness, blistering or peeling of the skin surrounding the site of treatment and fatigue or a feeling of exhaustion not improved with rest. Side effects may be site specific[4]:
  - Head and neck may produce mouth/gum sores, difficulty swallowing, stiffness in the jaw and nausea.[4]
  - Chest may produce difficulty swallowing, cough and shortness of breath, Patients can develop pneumonitis or an inflammation of the lung occurring between 2 weeks and 6 months after radiation therapy. This can evolve into pulmonary scarring and long-term breathing problems.[4]
  - Stomach/abdomen may produce nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.
  - Pelvis may produce digestive problems and bladder irritation.[4]
- **Immunotherapy** – General therapy side effects may begin at any point during therapy and may include flu like symptoms such as fever, chills, weakness, nausea, vomiting, fatigue, and headaches.[5]

Possible accommodation considerations[2]:

Many people can work during chemotherapy, as long as they match their work schedule to how they feel.

- Ability to work part-time or from home on days symptoms are worse[3]
- If work from home is not available, ability to work isolated from others may be beneficial for those who are immunocompromised[3]
- Staggered schedules to work around therapy days when side effects may peak[3]
- Periodic breaks or a private area to rest or to take medication[2]
- Modification of office temperature[2]
- Reallocation or redistribution of marginal tasks to another employee[2]

1. American Cancer Society. (2023). Treatments and Side Effects. Accessed July 2025 from American Cancer Society: https://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects.html
2. EEOC. (2013, March). U.S. Equal Opportunity Employment Commission. Accessed July 2025 from Cancer in the Workplace and the ADA: https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/cancer-workplace-and-ada
3. National Cancer Institute. (2025, May 15). Chemotherapy to Treat Cancer. Accessed July 2025 from National Cancer Institute: https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/types/chemotherapy#working-during-chemotherapy
4. National Cancer Institute. (2025, May 15). Radiation Therapy Side Effects. Accessed July 2025 from National Cancer Institute: https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/types/radiation-therapy/side effects
5. National Cancer Institute. (2023, February 16). Immunotherapy Side Effects. Accessed July 2025 from National Cancer Institute: https://www.cancer.gov/about- cancer/treatment/types/immunotherapy/side-effects
6. National Cancer Institute. (2025, May 7). Cancer Statistics. Accessed July 2025 form National Cancer Institute: https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/understanding/statistics

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