# Will You Be Able to Keep Your Job Post-Cancer?

Cancer and its treatment can have severe side effects that can affect employment.

February 16, 2021 By Caroline Tien

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Cancer and its treatment can permanently impair your ability to work, according to a study conducted by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's (NASEM) Committee on Diagnosing and Treating Adult Cancers. The study was sponsored by the Social Security Administration (SSA).

One third of the estimated 16.9 million cancer survivors in the United States are of working age (over 20 and under 65), meaning they are eligible to apply for benefits through the SSA's Disability Insurance program if they meet its requirements.

Certain cancer types are particularly likely to impair one's ability to work. Physical and mental handicaps associated with lung cancer, breast cancer and colorectal cancer alone account for 42% of annual cancer disability claims, according to a NASEM press release. These handicaps include pain, fatigue, swelling, nerve damage, "chemo brain," depression and anxiety and can manifest months or even years into remission.

"Some cancer survivors may be eager to get back to work for financial reasons, the sense of routine and for social connectivity; however, the cancer type, stage and the type and duration of treatment may all factor into the decision about when and how to return to work," Dan G. Blazer, MD, a professor emeritus of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Duke University School of Medicine and the chair of the committee that conducted the study, said in the press release.

The report also includes a review of contemporary cancer treatments and rehabilitation techniques. Surgical and pharmacological interventions, including minimally invasive surgeries, immunotherapies and emerging radiation techniques, have significantly improved cancer survival rates—but they have also increased the risk for long-term or late-onset side effects, the researchers wrote.

The authors call for more research into the impact these interventions have on the mind and body. In addition, they found, non-pharmacological interventions, such as exercise, counseling, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, language therapy and survivorship care—all of

which have been shown to be effective at improving patient outcomes—are sorely underutilized in clinical settings.

“The information in this report will help the SSA better understand what cancer survivors experience and what constitute cancer or treatment-related functional side effects when considering disability claims. It will also help patients, their caregivers and physicians provide clear information when filing disability claims.” Deborah Watkins Bruner, PhD, the senior vice president for research at Emory University and a member of the committee, told the Emory University News Center.

The second leading cause of death in the United States, cancer claims about 600,000 lives each year. As prevention, detection and treatment efforts continue to improve, cancer-related impairments will only become more common and their economic costs steeper. The impact of a cancer diagnosis on lifetime productivity is thus an issue that will become more relevant in the coming years.

To see whether Cancer Health readers think the Americans With Disabilities Act is effective at protecting people who are in treatment for cancer or who have survived cancer, take this poll. To learn more about the pitfalls of federal disability programs, read “Why Disability Doesn’t Work if You Work, With Advanced Illness.”

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