



# ASK THE EXPERTS

## SEPTEMBER 2024

### MINDSET AND MENTAL HEALTH

*I was just diagnosed with cancer. I am worried that if I share this with my employer, I could lose my job. What should I do?*

CANCER – who, me? I wasn't feeling that sick. Now what do I do? Wait – Fred in finance announced he had cancer and then he was gone. Did he get let go? Or maybe he couldn't work. I was not that close to him. What am I going to do?

If you're asking yourself questions like these, you're not alone. I've been there, and I know how overwhelming it can feel. Let me share what I've learned from my own experience and research.

When, how, and who you tell about your cancer diagnosis will be an evolving personal decision. It depends on various factors:

- How you're feeling physically and emotionally
- Your treatment plans
- Changing information from your medical team and other resources
- Who it may impact on your work team
- Your personal comfort level with sharing this information

You'll likely be bombarded with medical information while simultaneously having many questions about your employment situation that few can answer definitively. It's a confusing time, and it's easy to withdraw. That's what I wanted to do... at first.

Here are some key points to consider:

1. **Workplace Reality:** 70% of persons diagnosed with cancer in 2023 were of prime workforce age [1]. Yet, it's rarely talked about in the workplace. This silence can make it feel even more isolating.
2. **Legal Protection:** Legally, employers cannot let a person go solely because of a medical diagnosis. However, they can terminate you for reasons unrelated to your cancer, such as performance issues or company restructuring. Knowing your rights is crucial. [2]
3. **Medical Needs and Work Impact:** The most important factor to consider is that your medical needs will evolve as you gain more information about your cancer and how your body responds to treatments. This will inevitably impact what work you can do. One treatment might cause no side effects, while the next may leave you unable to work for days. This unpredictability is one of the hardest parts of navigating work and treatment.
4. **Prepare for Questions:** Be ready for unexpected comments or questions. For instance, unexplained weight loss can be a sign of cancer. Someone might say, "Wow, you've really lost weight. How have you done it?" or "Are you feeling okay? You've lost weight." Having prepared responses like the ones below can help you feel more in control.
  - "I've made some changes to my diet and lifestyle. It's a work in progress."
  - "I'm managing some health changes, but I'm okay. Thanks for your concern."
  - "I've been working with my doctor on some health goals. It's an ongoing process."
  - "It's been a journey, but I'm here and ready to tackle our tasks. What's on our agenda today?"
5. **Deciding Who to Tell:** Think carefully about who needs to know about your condition. Consider both professional necessity and personal support.
6. **How to Share the News:** Once you've decided who to tell, the next challenge is how to do it. Here's what helped me:
  - Write down what you want to say.
  - Practice with a trusted friend or family member.
  - Prepare yourself for a range of responses.
  - Try not to read too much into initial reactions; people often need time to process.

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7. **Talking to Your Employer:** When speaking with your supervisor or HR:
  - Emphasize that your situation may change depending on your treatment and how you respond to it.
  - Be clear about what you know now, but also about what's uncertain.
  - Discuss potential accommodations you might need.
  - Ask about company policies regarding medical leave and flexible work arrangements.
8. **Know Your Rights:** To better understand your legal protections, consult resources like Cancer & Careers [3] and the American Cancer Society [4]. Don't hesitate to seek legal advice if you're unsure about your rights.
9. **Support Network:** Build a support network both inside and outside of work. This can include colleagues, friends, family, and support groups for cancer patients.
10. **Flexibility is Key:** Remember that your needs and ability to work may fluctuate. Be open with your employer about changes in your condition or treatment plan that might affect your work.

Will you lose your job if you tell others? It's unlikely, but I can't guarantee it won't happen. What I can say is that being informed about your rights and having open communication with your employer often leads to better outcomes.[2]

Remember, this is just the beginning of navigating cancer and your career. Each person's journey is unique, and what works best for you may evolve over time.

Most importantly, take care of yourself. Your health comes first, and there are people and resources available to support you through this challenging time. One of the best resources that I found is the service Caring Bridge [5]. It is a free website where you can post updates to many people at once — instead, of trying to remember what information you shared with which person.

#### References

1. The issue | Cancer and careers. (n.d.). <https://www.cancerandcareers.org/en/about-us/the-issue>
2. Disability discrimination and employment decisions. (n.d.). US EEOC. <https://www.eeoc.gov/disability-discrimination-and-employment-decisions>
3. Cancer and Careers: <https://www.cancerandcareers.org/en>
4. American Cancer Society: <https://www.cancer.org/>
5. Caring Bridge: <https://www.caringbridge.org/>

#### Resources

[Visible and Non-Apparent Illnesses and Disabilities KNOW YOUR RIGHTS](#), Career Experts Group Resource Guide  
[CANCER AND CAREERS: A Resource for Workers with Cancer](#), (“Your Career > Your Future” October 2023 newsletter)