

Reference document

Facing cancer



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Introduction

Cancer. Just the word is enough to make you shiver and evoke all sorts of emotions. This disease hits loved ones as hard as the affected person, and has an effect on the workplace and colleagues in turn.

According to the Canadian Cancer Society, it is the leading cause of death in this country—responsible for approximately 30% of all deaths. Fortunately, research is always moving forward, and effective treatments are currently available.

Definition

In plain language, cancer occurs when a mutated cell develops abnormally, becoming a malignant tumor. By multiplying rapidly, it causes damage to healthy cells and internal organs.

Myths and facts*

- Only people in poor health or smokers can get cancer.
FALSE. It's true that those factors contribute to accelerating the multiplication of cancerous cells; however, cancer can affect anyone, even those in good health.
- When a person has cancer, they must stop all activities to devote themselves to treatment.
FALSE. Following a cancer diagnosis, many people will reduce or even stop their activities. However, it remains important to maintain a "normal" level of activity in order to be there for oneself and others.
- There is little chance of survival after a cancer diagnosis.
TRUE AND FALSE. Doctors inform patients of their chances of survival according to their type of cancer, its stage and the treatments to follow. Fortunately, today, many cancers can be treated and cured. Research is ongoing, and treatments are improving to increase the chances of survival.

* More information about the myths surrounding cancer can be found on the Canadian Cancer Society's website.

Steps and symptoms

Early symptoms

Sometimes, cancerous cells are discovered only when they are at an advanced stage. However, various symptoms can help detect the disease, for example: a suspicious lump, persistent coughing, severe fatigue, headaches or a skin condition. Although these symptoms can point to other types of illness, a medical opinion should be sought out if there is any doubt. Doctors may order blood work, x-rays or other diagnostic tests, depending on the symptoms reported.

Investigation

While awaiting a diagnosis, a person may become very stressed and ask themselves questions like: Do I have cancer? Am I going to make it? How will my loved ones take the news? What will happen to me? What will happen to my family?

Announcement of a diagnosis

The announcement of a cancer diagnosis can turn someone's life upside down. After presenting the treatments required and chances for survival, the medical specialist will generally ensure the patient is taken into care quickly to begin treatment. Some specialists struggle with finding the right words and show less compassion. For this reason, it is preferable to have someone you trust accompany you to the doctor's office to provide support and lend an ear. Afterwards, the medical team can answer any questions that were not asked during the initial meeting with the doctor, as needed.

A multitude of services are available to help the person and their family members express the pain, fear and anger surrounding the announcement of the disease. These emotions are experienced by both the person and their loved ones, who do not always know how to react.

At work, colleagues must also learn to deal with the reality. They could be affected in different ways depending on the affected person's position or their reaction. Management should therefore remain available and allow employees to express themselves about the situation to make it less alarming or clarify incorrect information.

A few tips

For the affected person and their loved ones

It is important to reach out and to communicate with the treatment team or other professionals that can help navigate these steps. Whenever possible, it is essential to take things one step at a time, continue to live a normal and active life, adopt a healthy lifestyle and avoid creating drama. As needed, the affected person can seek support through an association; specialized organizations are also a good source of assistance, whether it be to facilitate transportation to check-ups or provide psychological support. Staying in touch with the workplace to give updates will facilitate a possible return to work while maintaining ties. It is also recommended to avoid staying isolated and to continue with daily or professional activities as much as possible.

For employers

It is important to let colleagues express their fears and worries, invite them to rally around the person or the family affected by cancer and offer them psychological assistance through support services, to reframe the situation while respecting their privacy.

For the person with cancer, listen to their needs. If the person continues working, offer them options to let them get to their medical appointments. If possible, teleworking or part-time work may be considered. Encourage them to seek professional help in their time of anxiety to share their fears or apprehensions.

Treatment

As soon as the disease is identified, treatment begins quickly. Depending on the type of treatment, the stage of the disease and the chances of a successful remission, the person may need a somewhat lengthy sick leave. Treatments vary, as do their side effects. The main treatments are surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy. They are carried out or administered under medical supervision, at home or in hospital, and the specialist determines the appropriate treatment based on the type of cancer. Periodic check-ups are required to assess the regression of the cancer cells and determine the steps to take.

The person who receives the cancer diagnosis is vulnerable and can feel powerless against the situation. The main emotions experienced are fear, anger, a sense of injustice, resignation, sadness or even hope.

Undergoing treatment and imagining worst-case scenarios can compromise the quality of life of the affected person and lead to depression. Confidence remains the key to maintaining a realistic attitude. Without resorting to magical thinking, maintaining a positive attitude is beneficial during this period. Undergoing the treatment sessions one at a time, engaging in self-care and continuing to partake in one's normal daily activities can make the treatment experience more positive.

Side effects

Considering that treatments have improved over the years, their side effects may be diminished. Nevertheless, serious side effects can occur, and it is possible for the affected person to discuss how to mitigate them with the doctor and treatment team.

One of the main side effects is fatigue, due to regular travel for various check-ups and treatments, or as a direct result of treatment. Fatigue can set in and remain even after treatments end. The best ways to recover are to resume activities gradually, not try to fast-track building up physical fitness and have fun. Adopting a healthy lifestyle is also evidence of success.

Post-treatment follow-up

When treatments have proven effective, it is possible for the doctor to announce a person is in remission. In such cases, researchers agree that after five years without a recurrence the person is considered cured. During this time, life continues and the person can gradually resume their regular activities without worry. They will, however, have to periodically see their specialist for a scan or other tests. The frequency of follow-up depends on the type of cancer, the patient's history and other factors. Post-treatment follow-up confirms that either everything is going well or other treatments are necessary.

Several documents have been produced on cancer prevention with relevant suggestions that the person in remission can focus on. For example, it is recommended to make dietary changes and increase the frequency of physical activity, depending on the person's particular situation.

It may be that their perspective on life has changed. The important thing for the person in remission then becomes making choices that matter to them. For some, that means spending more time with family; others might decide to travel or live life more fully. In short, it all depends on the individual.

For the support person, feelings can also vary, from relief and displays of joy to persistent worry and overprotection of the person. Again, maintaining a realistic attitude, staying informed and expressing emotions are all outlets for balancing these two extremes.

Return to work

When the person comes back from their sick leave, preparation before the return to work can be a good way to prevent possible episodes of psychological distress. Some people realize that they have less energy, feel depleted or live in fear of a relapse.

Accommodations may be necessary depending on the person, their doctor and the workplace. As necessary and depending on the possibilities offered by the employer, this can take the form of a gradual return, reduced hours over a longer period, a change in tasks, teleworking or a change of position.

The return to work of caregivers might also require particular attention, particularly in cases where the person with cancer passed away. It would then be important to monitor the grief process.

End of life

Unfortunately, sometimes treatments are not successful and the inevitable occurs.

Nobody likes to be told that their life will be over in a few months. However, people experience the announcement in various ways, because each affected person has their own way of handling adversity. It is still important to communicate and express emotions during this time. The sick person, as well as their loved ones, can have contradicting feelings: some want to keep fighting the disease and step up their search for alternative treatments while others will take the time to say their goodbyes and live intensely in the moment with their loved ones.

A grieving process generally begins from the time of the negative prognosis. The employer and work team can provide support to the family by contacting them or visiting the affected person, if their condition allows for it. All forms of sympathy for the family and the affected person are welcome: cards, flowers, telephone calls—anything that seems most meaningful to the person.

Caregivers and survival mode

Regardless of the treatment outcome, caregivers can deplete their energy and give everything to the person who is undergoing treatment or dying. Requests for sick leave can result due to burnout, unresolved grief, or depression. The employer could see their employee burn out and request leave to take care of a sick loved one. Depending on the situation, some financial compensation exists, such as Employment Insurance Compassionate Care Benefits, to allow a family member to take time off work to care for a sick loved one.

Conclusion

Receiving a cancer diagnosis is never good news, and the prognosis can be grim. The disease hits loved ones and work colleagues as hard as the affected person. Fortunately, research is always moving forward, and effective treatments are available for certain types of cancer. Today, over 60% of Canadians with cancer are still alive five years after being diagnosed. In the 1940s, the survival rate was approximately 25%.

A person's attitude following the announcement of the disease or during treatment influences the way that they live through these stages. As a manager, if an employee or family member is affected, support and communication are two factors that help employees get through the experience as positively as possible. Employees who feel supported are more likely to keep working or return to work quickly.

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Quebec Cancer Foundation: www.fqc.qc.ca/en, or INFO-CANCER: 1-800-363-0063