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## **Breast Cancer Comes To Work**

By: Caroline Tapp-McDougall

Thanks to the Canadian Cancer Society and various fund-raising walks and events, many Canadians know that breast cancer is the most common cancer among women. However, the risks are still very real. An estimated 22,300 women will be diagnosed with the disease this year. Of those women, 5,300 will die. To make these numbers even more realistic, consider that one in nine women is expected to develop breast cancer during her lifetime. Suddenly, it's not someone else who's at risk. It's your mother, wife, daughter, or a co-worker.

### **What Is Breast Cancer?**

According to the American Cancer Society, breast cancer begins when cancer cells form a lump or mass, called a tumour, in breast tissue. Most breast abnormalities are not cancerous and do not spread. Some breast cancers are considered 'in situ,' meaning they have not spread beyond where they begin. Nearly all cancers at this stage can be cured. However, some breast tumours are invasive. They start in the breast lobules or ducts, but have broken through the duct or gland walls to invade the breast's surrounding fatty tissue. The seriousness of this type depends on the extent that the cancer has spread when it is first diagnosed.

### **How Is It Treated?**

Workplace education of breast cancer and its risks and detection is vital to improving employee health. As mentioned, early detection leads to early treatment and better outcomes. Depending on the type and stage of cancer, different treatment options are available to employees who have recently been diagnosed. These include surgery – the most common type of treatment – as well as radiation therapy, chemotherapy, hormone therapy, and monoclonal antibody therapy. The different treatment options have varying success rates.

As well, each treatment has side effects which impact each person differently. For example, an employee who has had radiation therapy may experience nausea, vomiting, or fatigue which can affect their on-the-job performance.

### **How Can I Accommodate Employees?**

Many women with breast cancer opt to stay at work during treatment. This decision is good for the workplace, as their valuable skills and experience are not lost. However, employee accommodations will be required. Some employees with cancer may need one or more of the following:

- Time off for doctor's appointments, radiation, or chemotherapy sessions
- Recuperation time after treatment
- Periodic breaks in a private area to rest or take medications
- Adjustments to the work schedule or permission to work at home
- Access to a private work telephone to call doctors or schedule appointments
- Shift changes to facilitate doctor's appointments or treatment times
- Possible reassignment to another, less strenuous, position

An example of an accommodation is when a bank teller arrives at work after chemotherapy treatments wearing a scarf on her head because she has lost her hair. Even though the bank has a policy of not letting employees wear hats, this may be a situation where a reasonable accommodation is required until her hair grows back.

Even if an employee has voluntarily disclosed that she has cancer, an employer cannot ask any questions about its prognosis or treatment. Medical documentation as to her condition cannot be requested. Only questions relating to her ability to handle certain tasks are permitted. For example, you could ask 'Are you able to travel out of town?' or 'Can you work rotating shifts?'

Fortunately, the prognosis for breast cancer is positive. Better quality mammography and organized breast screening programs have led to more breast cancers being detected earlier, which means successful treatment. Employers and HR professionals can play an important role by encouraging all employees to be regularly screened for breast cancer and by accommodating and supporting those employees who have been diagnosed with the disease. ■

Caroline Tapp-McDougall is the publisher of Solutions: Canada's Family Guide to Home Health Care and Wellness and the author of The Complete Canadian Eldercare Guide