

QUALITY OF LIFE

Cancer survivors more likely to face unemployment

Adult cancer survivors under the age of 65 years are more likely to be out of work after treatment than people who have not had cancer, concludes a large meta-analysis. “This is the first study to systematically summarize the risk of unemployment for adults who survived cancer,” says the study’s lead author, Angela de Boer of the Academic Medical Center, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Advances in cancer treatment in recent years have lengthened survival times significantly. Currently, “almost half of all cancer survivors are younger than 65 years,” notes de Boer. Despite this, few studies have looked at how cancer survivors fare in the job market or at the difficulties they experience getting back into work after treatment.

The research team analyzed 36 studies dating from 1966 to June 2008 to compare the employment experiences of 20,366 cancer survivors—predominantly in the

US and Europe—with those of 157,603 healthy controls. The main finding was that, overall, cancer survivors were 1.37 times more likely to be unemployed than controls. The 34% unemployment rate among cancer survivors found across all studies does indicate, however, that the majority were successful in returning to work or finding new work.

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The study uncovered distinct differences between survivors of different cancers. Unemployment was particularly high among people who had been treated for breast cancer, gastrointestinal cancer or cancers of the female reproductive

tract. Those who had survived blood malignancies, prostate cancer or testicular cancer fared better, having very similar employment levels to those of controls.

“Job discrimination, difficulty combining treatment with full-time work and physical or mental limitations may be major causes of [the observed] unemployment,” suggests de Boer. She and her co-authors recommend that more effort be put into innovative treatments, support services and rehabilitation that help patients return to work. “Evaluation of such interventions is urgently needed because they could mitigate the economic impact of surviving cancer and improve the quality of life for survivors,” she stresses.

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Original article de Boer, A. G. E. M. *et al.* Cancer survivors and unemployment: a meta-analysis and meta-regression. *JAMA* 301, 753–762 (2009).