

# Study identifies barriers for women returning to work after breast cancer

May 11 2022

---



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Occupational therapy researchers find women living with and beyond breast cancer in Ireland are not aware of their employment entitlements and in response to findings have developed the occupational therapy-led

"Work and Cancer" program that focuses on these entitlements and strategies for managing physical and psychological health in the workplace.

New research from the Discipline of Occupational Therapy, Trinity College suggests that some [women](#) living with and beyond a [breast cancer diagnosis](#) in Ireland are not availing of important supports in the workplace to successfully return to work following [cancer treatment](#). The main reason is that they are not aware of their employment rights and entitlements and, consequently, are not availing of important supports such as reasonable accommodations in the workplace to successfully transition back to work following [cancer](#) treatment.

In addition, some of the women participating in the study identified experiences of indirect discrimination and discussed pressures and unfair expectations placed on them when they returned to work. This is often due to a lack of awareness on the part of the employer of the debilitating and enduring nature of the side-effects of cancer and its treatment.

The paper "Breast cancer survivorship and employment in Ireland: Legislative systems and the return to work of women with breast cancer" was recently published in the international journal, *WORK: A Journal of Prevention, Assessment & Rehabilitation*.

Naomi Algeo, Researcher at the School of Medicine, Trinity, and Senior Occupational Therapist at St. James's Hospital, said: "We interviewed women living with and beyond [breast](#) cancer, healthcare professionals, and employers across Ireland. We found that most women with [breast cancer](#) who participated in our research were unaware of their entitlements and rights in the context of a cancer diagnosis. Healthcare professionals are not advising of workplace legislation because they themselves are not aware of them in the first place. This is important as many women may not be availing of, or being signposted by healthcare

professionals to, important supports such as reasonable accommodations in the workplace in order to complete their job role and enjoy equal employment opportunities."

Under Irish legislation, any employee with a cancer diagnosis has the right to reasonable accommodations to complete their job role and enjoy equal employment opportunities. This could be anything from a phased return to work after a cancer diagnosis, ergonomic changes to the workspace, or facilitating working from home, if feasible within the job description. Reasonable accommodations are typically put in place to manage side-effects such as cancer-related fatigue, cognitive dysfunction, or reduced activity tolerance.

Naomi Algeo continued: "Occupational therapists can support this cohort in navigating return to work after cancer and educate on strategies for managing these often-debilitating [side-effects](#), although there is a need to expand [occupational therapy](#) resources in Ireland in order to provide this support."

The women who participated in this research identified the need for information and support from [healthcare professionals](#) to prepare them for going back to work. As a result, the research team developed the Occupational Therapy-led "Work and Cancer" program that focuses on employment entitlements and strategies for managing physical and psychological health in the workplace. Research to date indicates that the Work and Cancer program increases participants' knowledge and confidence to successfully negotiate provision of statutory workplace supports and accommodations from their employers. Ongoing research on the Work and Cancer program continues in collaboration with the Cuisse Cancer Support Centre, Portlaoise.

**More information:** Naomi Algeo et al, Breast cancer survivorship and employment in Ireland: Legislative systems and the return to work of

women with breast cancer, *Work* (2022). [DOI: 10.3233/WOR-205044](https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-205044)

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

Citation: Study identifies barriers for women returning to work after breast cancer (2022, May 11) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-05-barriers-women-breast-cancer.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.