

Efficacy of Return to Work Occupational Therapy Interventions for Cancer Patients: A Systematic Review

Cadie Almarez, OTS, Harper Caporale, OTS, Sean Luscombe, OTS, Melissa Nelson, OTS
Hawai'i Pacific University, Doctor of Occupational Therapy Program, Honolulu, Hawai'i

Research Question

Which OT interventions are most effective to support return-to-work for adults within the cancer continuum?

Introduction

- **The Employment Impact:**
 - 92% of cancer survivors lose employment within 15 months of diagnosis.
 - Only 30% secure a new job within 2 years (Bellagamba et al., 2021).
- **Financial Toxicity & HRQoL:**
 - Job loss = Employment loss can lead to reduced sense of identity, financial independence, and wellness.
 - Financial burden = Increased financial stress can cause severe anxiety, depression, and poor treatment adherence (Carlson et al., 2021).
- **The Need for Proactive Education:**
 - Early education = increased knowledge of treatment and recovery trajectory leads to better health outcomes (Carlson et al., 2021).
- **Purpose of the Review:**
 - To systematically evaluate the evidence for early educational interventions and caregiver-inclusive OT programs in improving return-to-work (RTW) rates and quality of life.

Method

- **Review Protocol:** Followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) Guidelines
- **Dates Searched:** May 15, 2026 to May 28, 2026
- **Inclusion Criteria:** Related to cancer care, RTW as outcome, published in English, published within past 5 years, peer-reviewed, occupational therapy
- **Exclusion Criteria:** Systematics reviews, meta-analyses, scoping reviews, dissertations, presentations
- **Databases:** CINAHL Complete, Medline, and Academic Search Complete using Hawai'i Pacific University's online library database
- **Search Terms:** Return-to-work, cancer, cancer care continuum, OT, intervention, and adults as well as a combination of these terms

Figure 1. OT Supports RTW in CS



(Unsplash, 2026)

Figure 2. Early Education on Expectations



(Unsplash, 2026)

Figure 3. RTW Goals Increase Employment Rates



(Unsplash, 2026)

References



Results

This review included six studies that met the inclusion criteria. These were assessed according to their risk of bias, level of evidence, and quality. Among these articles emerged **two main themes**:

1. Early education on prognosis and RTW
2. Living with vs. without a caregiver/family

Those living with a caregiver or family had improved health-related quality of life (HRQoL), emotional support, and a means for medical communication (Blichfeldt et al., 2023). Early education on treatment expectations was identified as a key factor supporting positive treatment outcomes. Occupational therapy interventions focusing on RTW goals showed promise in increasing employment rates and overall health outcomes after treatment (Bellagamba et al., 2021). See Figures 1-3.

Discussion

- OT is important for CS in returning to work, as it can improve employment, health, and overall quality of life.
- Receiving early information was strongly suggested as it can allow more opportunities to financially plan for time when they won't be able to work.
- Having support from family/caregiver plays a significant role in patients' RTW status, as they tend to prioritize social interaction compared to those who live alone (Blichfeldt et al., 2023).
- Occupational therapists can provide early education on how CS can prepare for the financial implications of treatment

Conclusion

Studies included in this systematic review provide preliminary evidence of the effectiveness of RTW-centered OT interventions for cancer survivors. RTW outcomes are further influenced by a variety of factors such as:

- Ongoing caregiver support
- Financial stability
- Early education on diagnosis and expected recovery milestones

OTs can use the results of this systematic review to further inform practice when working with cancer survivors (Carlson et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2024).