

# Higher Education Academic Accommodations After Cancer and Treatment

## Why do I need this guide?

Students with a history of cancer may be eligible for academic accommodations, such as extra time on assignments, permission to make audio recordings of classes, reduced course load, and priority registration for courses.

It's important to note that high school students who have formalized education support plans (such as an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 plan) **cannot** automatically transfer their academic supports to their college or university. Students must contact their college or university's office of disability services (sometimes called by another, similar name such as student support services) to request accommodations. This process must be completed by the student (**not** their parents/caregivers).

## Is cancer a disability?

This guide discusses disability in the legal sense. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), someone with a disability is a "person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity." Attending school and learning is a major life activity. If your history of cancer means that you need accommodations to attend class, learn, perform on assignments, or access the content and curriculum and materials being used in your classes, then you qualify as a student with a disability. There is *nothing* wrong with having a disability or seeking accommodations. Biases that favor people without disabilities is called ableism.

## What are my rights as a higher education student with a history of cancer?

In the United States colleges and universities **cannot** legally discriminate against individuals with disabilities. Students who have been treated for cancer and experience late effects are often considered individuals with disabilities under the ADA. Schools of higher education must provide reasonable accommodations to students who demonstrate that they have a disability.

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## How do I get the accommodations I need?

**Step 1:** Register at your college or university as a student with a disability. Contact your school's office of disability services and ask to register.

**Step 2:** Provide proof of your disability. This step requires you to have documentation showing that you have a disability. Documentation from your medical provider(s) can be helpful in demonstrating disability status.

**Step 3:** Share the types of accommodations you need with the student disability office of your college/university. In high school your family and a team of educators would determine what accommodations would best meet your needs. In college/university **you** must tell the disability office what you need. If you are unsure, you can look at past IEPs/504 plans and talk to your medical providers. Have a list ready to share with the office of disability services.

**Step 4:** Share your approved accommodation with your professors. Once you have your accommodations approved by the office of disability services it is up to you to share this information with your professors.

## How can I prepare to work with my school's disability services office?

The ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act require colleges and universities to **provide reasonable accommodations** to students with qualifying disabilities. This means that you must provide evidence of your documented disability to your school. You will also be asked to describe how your disability impacts you and what accommodations you are seeking. Most schools have an intake form for you to complete. Below are the most common questions asked on these forms so that you can be prepared to confidently answer!

### ***What is your disability?***

You will be asked to name your disability or health condition. This is a complicated step for young adults with a history of cancer, as many offices may be unaware of neurocognitive late effects related to childhood cancer and treatment. You may want to talk to a relevant healthcare provider about how to describe your condition (such as your oncologist, neuropsychologist, etc.).

Here are some ways you can describe your disability:

- "Neurocognitive late effects of childhood cancer and treatment."
- "Neurocognitive disorder from childhood cancer and treatment."
- "Neurocognitive disorder due to physical condition."

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## ***How do your disability impact you?***

You will be asked to describe how your disability impacts your ability to access instruction and resources at your college/university. Again, you may want to talk with a relevant healthcare provider to assist you in making a list. Below are some common ways childhood cancer late effects impact college -aged students:

- Thinking and learning (attention, executive functions, memory, reading, processing speed)
- Mental health (mood disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder /adjustment disorder, anxiety)
- Immune system (immunocompromised/ immunosuppressed)
- Clinical appointments (must miss classes for specialists' medical visits)
- Physical impacts (fine motor weakness, fatigue, headaches, low-vision, hard-of-hearing, etc.)

## ***What accommodations are you seeking?***

In high school your school team and parents generate a list of accommodations for you. In college/university you will be asked to create this list yourself. You can use your old Section 504 plans/IEPs to help come up with ideas. You can also work with the disability office at your school to update your accommodations once you are more familiar with college life.

Here are examples of accommodations to address the impacts of cancer and treatment listed above.

- Extended time for assignments and assessments
- Open note assessments
- Permission to audio record classes
- Access to text-to-speech and speech-to-text software
- Testing in another (less distracting) location
- Alternatives to attending class in-person
- Flexibility with attendance policy

### **What documentation do you have and from whom?**

You will be asked to provide documentation of your disability. You can provide old Section 504 plans and IEPs, but a **letter from a relevant medical provider** might be more useful to childhood cancer survivors. This can be a simple letter stating that you have a history of cancer and treatment and have documented late effects. Some colleges/universities may require cognitive or educational evaluations. If you are still enrolled in high school, you can request a new evaluation. If you have already completed high school, you can ask your medical provider for referrals to a neuropsychologist.

### **Don't forget to make sure your approved accommodations plan is shared with your professors and relevant college/university staff!**

Once you are approved for academic accommodations which with your college/university's disability services office to determine how professors should be alerted to your accommodations. In some cases, the professors are automatically alerted, but this is not guaranteed!

It is often the responsibility of the student to inform faculty and relevant staff members of their approved accommodations. You can do this during an in-person meeting or via email (email provides evidence if there is a dispute later). Some students find it awkward to explain to share their accommodations plan with their professors.

Below is a sample email you can send at the start of the term:

*Dear Professor \_\_\_\_\_,*

*My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am in your \_\_\_\_\_ class (section \_\_\_\_ ) that meets on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_ o'clock. I am writing to inform you of my approved accommodations from the student disability office. (Please see the attached accommodations form.) If you have any questions about my accommodations or needs in class, please let me know. I look forward to learning from you this semester.*

*Sincerely,*

\_\_\_\_\_



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