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## Cancer - exercise to help you cope

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### Summary

- If you have cancer and you are having treatment or have completed treatment, you should always consult a doctor before beginning or continuing an exercise program.
  - Depending on your cancer or treatment, you might not be allowed to exercise.
  - Physical activity can boost the energy levels for many people with cancer.
  - Regular exercise improves the immune system and may help your body to deal with some cancer and cancer treatments.
  - Aim for five to 20 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise on most days of the week.
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Much of the research to date on exercise and cancer has focused on cancer prevention. Recently, however, research has started to examine the effectiveness of exercise for people with cancer.

The current evidence suggests exercise is beneficial for most people during cancer treatment. The evidence also shows there's little risk of harm if care is taken and professional exercise advice is followed closely.

Australia's National Physical Activity Guidelines for Adults recommend everyone should aim to do at least 30 minutes of physical activity on most, preferably all, days of the week. People with cancer should be as physically active as their abilities and condition allow.

Cancer treatment causes a range of side effects that are different for different people. Exercise has been shown to help people cope with many of the side effects of cancer treatment, including:

- fatigue
- nausea (feeling sick) and loss of appetite
- anaemia (low red blood cell or haemoglobin count)
- depression and anxiety
- body weight and composition (muscle and fat) changes.

### Who can exercise with cancer?

Most people being treated for cancer are able to participate in an exercise program. Some people may need a modified program and others may have to delay starting a program.

Talk to your doctor before starting exercise. You may need a modified exercise program if you have any of the following conditions:

- lymphoedema
- fatigue
- anaemia
- shortness of breath
- low platelet count
- radiation therapy burns
- compromised immune function
- damage to nerves (peripheral neuropathy)
- primary or metastatic bone cancer.

You will need to delay the start of an exercise program if you have severe anaemia, fever or severe weight loss.

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Try to avoid being physically inactive. Some days will be harder than others but even a few minutes of light exercise is better than no exercise at all.

### **Benefits of exercise for people with cancer**

The benefits of exercise for people with cancer may include:

- increased muscle strength and endurance
- increased energy and decreased cancer-related fatigue
- improved bone density and range of motion of the joints
- increased cardiovascular and respiratory function
- decreased nausea and vomiting for some people on chemotherapy
- improved appetite
- deeper and more refreshing sleep
- increased feelings of control over your life
- improved digestion and reduced constipation
- decreased levels of stress and anxiety
- improved mood.

These benefits can help with your recovery and reduce the common side effects of treatment, such as fatigue, nausea, anxiety, depression and muscle weakness. Exercise and good nutrition can help you to create a healthy, active lifestyle and help you get back into daily life and work, with your colleagues, friends and family.

### **Before you start an exercise program with cancer**

Before taking part in any exercise program, either during or soon after your treatment, it's important to talk with your oncologist or general practitioner (GP) about any precautions you should take.

If it's been a while since you've been active, or your fitness level is low, start slowly and build up gradually.

Starting an exercise program can be overwhelming. You may have lots of questions. Exercise professionals, such as exercise physiologists and physiotherapists, are specifically trained to give advice on exercise. Medicare or your private health fund may provide some limited cover for visits to an accredited exercise physiologist or physiotherapist. Ask your GP for a referral to an exercise professional or use the Exercise & Sports Science Australia website.

Your exercise physiologist can work with you and your doctor to develop an exercise program tailored for you. Many structured exercise programs offered at places such as gyms will ask you for medical clearance before starting.

### **Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Oncologist
- Exercise physiologist
- Hospital physiotherapist
- Hospital occupational therapist
- Cancer Council Australia Helpline Tel. 13 11 20
- Peter McCallum Cancer Centre Tel. (03) 9656 111

### **Things to remember**

- There are many benefits of exercise for people with cancer.
- Most people being treated for cancer are able to participate in an exercise program.
- Talk to your doctor before starting exercise - some people may need a modified program and others may have to delay starting a program.

- If it's been a while since you've been active, or your fitness level is low, start slowly and build up gradually.

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