
Cancer - exercise to help you cope

Summary

- Exercise is very beneficial for people with cancer.
 - It can improve fatigue, mental wellbeing, physical function and quality of life.
 - All people being treated for, and recovering from, cancer are advised to avoid inactivity and exercise regularly – be as physically active as your current condition and abilities allow.
 - To maximise the benefits of exercise, people with cancer should participate in an individually tailored exercise program involving moderate-high intensity aerobic exercise (such as walking) and resistance exercise (such as lifting weights).
 - Exercise is safe for people with cancer when it is appropriately prescribed and monitored.
 - Seeking the advice of an exercise physiologist with cancer experience is recommended so you can receive an individually tailored exercise prescription.
 - If it's been a while since you've been active, or your fitness level is low, start slowly and build up gradually.
 - Remember that even on the days when you don't feel like being active, any level of exercise is better than none and even small amounts of activity can be beneficial.
 - Accredited exercise physiologists and physiotherapists are the most appropriate health professionals to prescribe and deliver exercise programs to people with cancer. Their services are eligible for subsidies through Medicare and private health insurers.
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Research has shown that exercise is a safe and effective way to counteract many of the negative physical and emotional effects of cancer and its treatment. In fact, exercise may be one of the best things people with cancer can do alongside their standard cancer treatments. This is because exercise can reduce and even prevent some of the common side effects of cancer and cancer treatments.

Studies confirm that people with cancer who participate in quality exercise programs have significantly less fatigue, lower levels of mental distress, better physical functioning and superior quality of life than those who don't exercise.

Emerging research suggests that being physically active may also lower the relative risk of cancer recurrence and extend survival for some types of cancer (research has predominantly focused on breast, colorectal and prostate cancers). However, more research is required to fully understand the impact of exercise on cancer progression and survival.

There are a range of other cancer related symptoms and side effects that appropriately prescribed exercise may help manage. For example, exercise may help maintain a healthy balance of muscle and fat mass, preserve bone mass, decrease pain, counteract peripheral neuropathy, manage lymphedema and enhance sleep quality.

While further research is required, exercise also appears to reduce the risk of cancer patients developing other chronic disease such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and osteoporosis.

Who can exercise with cancer?

All people with cancer are strongly encouraged to avoid inactivity and participate in regular exercise.

Exercise is safe for people with cancer when it is appropriately prescribed and monitored. Precautions are commonly required for cancer patients with complex or uncontrolled conditions. This means that some people may need a modified program and others may have to delay starting a program.

If you are concerned about the safety of exercise, seek the advice of a qualified health professional (such as your cancer specialists, GP, exercise physiologist or physiotherapist) before getting started.

You may need a modified exercise program if you have any of the following conditions:

- pain
- lymphoedema
- moderate-severe fatigue
- anaemia
- significant 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.

It's important to 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

We all know that exercise is good for us but research indicates that exercise is particularly important in the management of cancer. In fact, the science suggests that exercise is one of the best things people with cancer can do alongside their cancer treatment plan.

That's because people who exercise regularly experience fewer and less severe side effects from cancer treatments. Additionally, people who are more physically active after a cancer diagnosis may have a lower risk of their cancer recurring and a lower risk of cancer mortality.

The benefits of exercise for people with cancer may include:

- improved health and wellbeing
- increased physical abilities, muscle strength and endurance
- increased energy and decreased cancer-related fatigue
- decreased levels of stress, depression and anxiety and improved mood
- improved heart function and reduced risk of heart disease
- improved bone density and reduced risk of osteoporosis
- increased flexibility and range of motion of the joints
- increased lung function and less shortness of breath
- increased balance and reduced risk of falling
- decreased nausea and vomiting for some people on chemotherapy
- improved appetite
- deeper and more refreshing sleep
- improved digestion and reduced constipation
- increased feelings of control over your life.

These benefits can help with your recovery and reduce the common side effects of treatment, such as fatigue, 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 after your treatment, it's important to talk with an appropriate health professional about any precautions you may need to take. This includes your oncologist, GP, an exercise physiologist or physiotherapist who has experience working with cancer patients.

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

important to listen to your body. While exercise requires exertion, you don't want to push yourself to the point of pain or excessive discomfort.

Starting an exercise program can be overwhelming. Given that cancer and its treatment impacts everyone differently, seeking the advice of an exercise physiologist can be very helpful. These university qualified health professionals have the knowledge and skills to provide you with an individually tailored exercise program specific to your current condition and abilities.

Medicare or your private health insurance 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.

Where to get help

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **Oncologist**
- **Exercise physiologist**
- Hospital physiotherapist
- **Cancer Council Australia Helpline** Tel. **13 11 20**
- **Peter McCallum Cancer Centre** Tel. **(03) 9656 111**
- **EX-MED Cancer** Tel. **1300 396 332**

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EX-MED Cancer

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