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# Nutrition Fact Sheet



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## Cancer and Physical Activity

Throughout the course of their lifetime, one in every two American men and one in every three American women will have some type of cancer. Cancer is the second leading cause of death in America and roughly one third of cancer-related deaths can be attributed to excess weight, poor diet and physical inactivity. Physical activity not only reduces the chances of developing cancer, but after diagnosis, it greatly improves the chance for survival, reduces the likelihood of recurrences and enhances quality of life. Daily exercise can improve general health and well-being, aid in healing, increase energy levels and build self esteem. In addition, it assists in the prevention of other diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, hypertension and osteoporosis. Although risk factors such as age, family history and ethnicity cannot be changed, you can control what you eat and how much you move – just a few minutes of activity a day can add years to your life!

### What is physical activity?

Physical activity refers to any type of bodily movement that works your muscles and uses more energy than you do at rest. Examples of physical activities are walking, running, swimming, climbing stairs, gardening and weight lifting. The benefits of physical activity are well established. Daily engagement in physical activity can help with weight control, bone health, muscle and joint strength, promote psychological well being, reduce fatigue, and significantly decrease the risk of developing health problems, such as obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

### Cancer and physical activity?

In the past, cancer patients have been advised to avoid physical activity in order to save strength and energy to battle the disease and withstand treatment. However, emerging evidence shows that physical activity and exercise are, in fact, beneficial during and after treatment, even for those undergoing complex procedures such as stem cell transplant. Many cancer patients experience pain or reduction in strength, balance, flexibility, endurance, and coordination. Each of these symptoms can affect the desire and ability to be active. However, physical activity and physical therapy can help regain lost skills, maintain independence and improve well-being. Physical activity has been shown to significantly improve one's physical and psychological state, before, during, and after treatment. Two of the most common physiological symptoms seen among cancer patients, are changes in weight and bone mass. These changes may lead to other complications, such as osteoporosis, bone fractures, obesity and diabetes. Being active can help

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**For more information:**

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to prevent these additional problems. Physical activity, resistance training in particular, has been shown to protect the bones, strengthen the muscles and joints and help maintain a healthy weight.

### **How might physical activity affect cancer survivorship?**

- ✓ Help control weight
- ✓ Improve body composition, body image, and quality of life
- ✓ Maintain or improve bone, muscle, and joint health
- ✓ Improve heart health and aerobic fitness
- ✓ Enhance appetite and promote intake of fluids
- ✓ Improve cognitive and motor function
- ✓ Regulate hormonal changes
- ✓ Enhance mood and mental state
- ✓ Improve treatment tolerance
- ✓ Decrease likelihood of reoccurrence
- ✓ Reduce fatigue and increase energy

### **How much physical activity?**

30 minutes a day of light to moderate activity 5 times a week has been shown to reduce the risk of developing cancer. It can also enhance treatment efficacy by minimizing symptoms, reducing toxicity, improving recovery, and decreasing the likelihood of recurrence.

### **What kind of physical activity can I do? *Everything counts!***

- ✓ Walk briskly around the block.
- ✓ To improve strength and balance – try backward walking, sideways walking, heel walking, toe walking and standing up from a sitting position.
- ✓ Gardening, house cleaning, shoveling, planting, home repair and cooking.
- ✓ Take the stairs instead of the elevator.
- ✓ Try yoga, Pilates, swimming or dancing.
- ✓ Stretch your body when you wake up and before you go to sleep. Use a resistance band if possible.
- ✓ Leave the car at home when shopping. Walk or bike instead.

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- ✓ Sit up straight! This strengthens abdominal muscles, improves balance and enhances bowel regularity.
- ✓ Make plans with friends to go for a walk or another activity where you are moving.
- ✓ Calisthenics – to strengthen your muscles, improve flexibility and enhance aerobic fitness.
- ✓ Try team sports - bowling, basketball, tennis (doubles), ping-pong (table tennis) or classes at the gym.

### **The 1, 2, 3 Steps for getting back your health**

1. Discuss with your primary caregiver about the level and type of physical activities that are appropriate for your current health status and obtain medical clearance before starting.
2. Engage in physical activity you enjoy.
3. Start slowly. Be creative and gradually increase the duration, intensity, and frequency, if desired.

### **Keep in mind**

- Cancer patients with weakened ability to fight infection should avoid exercising in public spaces.
- Adapt, but be realistic! Don't over-train your body, as it may have a negative effect. Even perfectly healthy people have limitations - work with yours. Remember, a little exercise is better than none.
- Start slowly and progress gradually. Avoid inactivity.
- If you feel too sick to exercise, don't! You can exercise later in the day or the next day.
- When done appropriately, exercise is safe, both during and after most types of cancer treatments.
- It is very important to remember that different cancer treatments have different effects on the body. A specific exercise or activity may be more appropriate than others. Be sure to discuss with your primary doctor what is the safest for you.

The **bottom line** is – when done appropriately, the health benefits of physical activity far outweigh the risks. Most importantly, avoid inactivity! Together with medical treatment and adequate nutrition, physical activity can help you in the battle against cancer.

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