

# Cancer and Exercise

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## Overview

It is estimated that 1 in every 3 Americans will get some form of cancer during their lifetime. Cancer is the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of death in the U.S. and roughly one third of cancer-related deaths can be attributed to excess weight, poor diet and physical inactivity. Although certain contributory causes of cancer, such as age, gender, and family history are fixed, a range of modifiable lifestyle and environmental factors can significantly reduce the risk for developing cancers. In fact, between 30 and 50% of all cancer cases are preventable according to the World Cancer Research Fund. Research shows that by achieving and maintaining a healthy weight, eating a balanced diet, avoiding tobacco, and getting regular exercise you can help provide your body with the necessary tools to fight cancer.

The benefits of physical activity are well established. Physical activity not only reduces the risk of developing cancer, but also greatly improves the chance for survival after diagnosis and significantly enhances overall quality of life. Daily exercise can improve general health and wellbeing, 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.

## 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. 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 complications and chronic disease.

## Cancer and Physical Activity

In the past, cancer patients have been advised to avoid physical activity 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 a stem cell transplant. Many cancer patients experience pain or reduction in strength, balance, flexibility, endurance, and coordination. Although each of these symptoms can affect the desire and ability to be active, exercise and physical therapy can help regain lost skills, maintain independence and improve well-being.

Two of the most common physiological symptoms seen among cancer patients are reductions in weight and bone mass. These changes may lead to severe and life-threatening complications that can be prevented or managed with adequate daily exercise. Studies show that 30 minutes a day of light to moderate activity 5 times a week can reduce the risk of developing cancer, enhance treatment efficacy by minimizing symptoms, reduce toxicity, improve recovery, and decrease the likelihood of recurrence. Speak with your healthcare provider to create an exercise routine that is individualized to your cancer diagnosis and level of physical ability.

# Cancer and Exercise

## The Benefits of Physical Activity for Cancer Survivors

- Helps to achieve and maintain a healthy weight.
- Reduces fatigue and increases energy levels.
- Improves body composition, body image, and quality of life.
- Maintains or improves bone, muscle, and joint health.
- Improves heart health and aerobic fitness.
- Enhances appetite and promotes intake of fluids.
- Improves cognitive and motor functions.
- Regulates hormonal changes.
- Enhances mood and mental state.
- Improves treatment tolerance.
- Decreases likelihood of recurrence.



## Physical Activity Guidelines

- Discuss with your primary caregiver about the level and type of physical activity that is appropriate for your current health status. Obtain medical clearance prior to initiating an exercise routine.
- Choose an exercise that you enjoy and start slowly. Gradually increase the duration, intensity and frequency as desired.
- Aerobic activity should be performed in episodes of at least 10 minutes, preferably spread throughout the week. Aerobic activity causes a person's heart to beat faster, exercises may include brisk walking, running, bicycling, or swimming.
- If able, try performing muscle-strengthening activities of moderate intensity that involve all major muscle groups at least twice a week. These types of exercises provide additional health benefits
- When implemented safely, the health benefits of physical activity far outweigh the risks. Most importantly, avoid inactivity!

*Revised February 2019.*