

Physical Therapy Can Lower Your Risk Of Cancer Recurrence

In the past, people being treated for a chronic illness (an illness a person may live with for a long time, like cancer or diabetes) were often told by their doctor to rest and reduce their physical activity. This is good advice if movement causes pain, rapid heart rate, or shortness of breath. But newer research has shown that exercise is not only safe and possible during cancer treatment, but it can improve how well you function physically and your quality of life.

Too much rest can lead to loss of body function, muscle weakness, and reduced range of motion. So today, many cancer care teams are urging their patients to be as physically active as possible during cancer treatment. Many people are learning about the advantages of being physically active after treatment, too.

Ways regular exercise may help you during cancer treatment

- ◆ Keep or improve your physical abilities (how well you can use your body to do things)
- ◆ Improve balance, lower risk of falls and broken bones
- ◆ Keep muscles from wasting due to inactivity
- ◆ Lower the risk of heart disease
- ◆ Lessen the risk of osteoporosis (weak bones that are more likely to break)
- ◆ Improve blood flow to your legs and lower the risk of blood clots
- ◆ Make you less dependent on others for help with normal activities of daily living
- ◆ Improve your self-esteem
- ◆ Lower the risk of being anxious and depressed
- ◆ Lessen nausea
- ◆ Improve your ability to keep social contacts
- ◆ Lessen symptoms of tiredness (fatigue)
- ◆ Help you control your weight
- ◆ Improve your quality of life

We still don't know a lot about how exercise and physical activity affect your recovery from cancer, or their effects on the immune system. But regular moderate exercise has been found to have health benefits for the person with cancer.

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Goals of an exercise program

During treatment

There are many reasons for being physically active during cancer treatment, but each person's exercise program should be based on what's safe and what works best for them. It should also be something you like doing. Your exercise plan should take into account any exercise program you already follow, what you can do now, and any physical problems or limits you have.

Certain things affect your ability to exercise, for instance:

- ◆ The type and stage of cancer you have
- ◆ Your cancer treatment
- ◆ Your stamina (endurance), strength, and fitness level

If you exercised before treatment, you might need to exercise less than usual or at a lower intensity during treatment. The goal is to stay as active and fit as possible. People who were very sedentary (inactive) before cancer treatment may need to start with short, low-intensity activity, such as short slow walks. For older people, those with cancer that has spread to the bones or osteoporosis (bone thinning), or problems like arthritis or peripheral neuropathy (numbness in hands or feet), safety and balance are important to reduce the risk of falls and injuries. They may need a caregiver or health professional with them during exercise.

Some people can safely begin or maintain their own exercise program, but many will have better results with the help of an exercise specialist, physical therapist, or exercise physiologist. Be sure to get your doctor's OK first, and be sure that the person working with you knows about your cancer diagnosis and any limitations you have. These specially trained professionals can help you find the type of exercise that's right and safe for you. They can also help you figure out how often and how long you should exercise.

Whether you're just starting exercise or continuing it, your doctor should have input on tailoring an exercise program to meet your interests and needs. Keep your cancer team informed on how you're doing in regards to your activity level and exercise throughout your treatment.

After treatment

When you are recovering from treatment

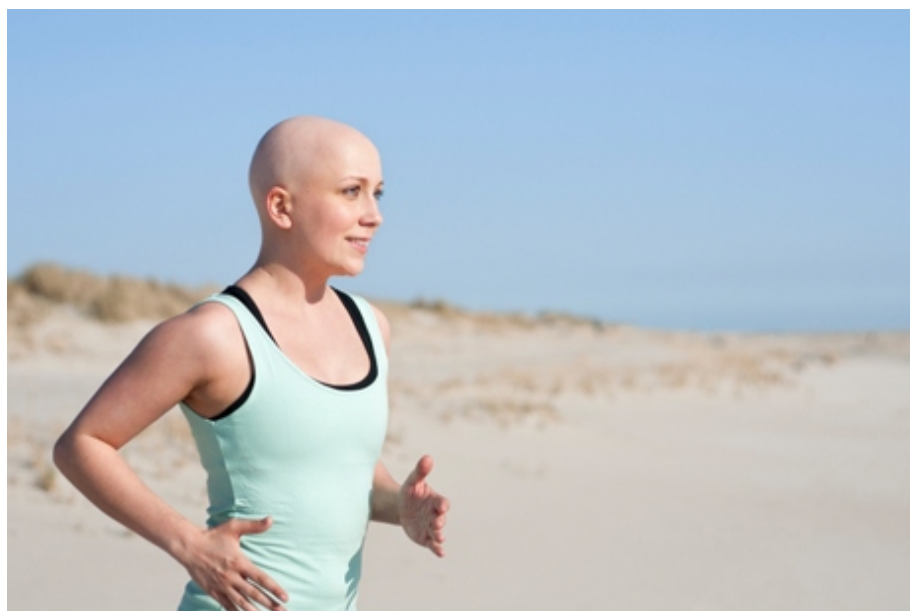
Many side effects get better within a few weeks after cancer treatment ends, but some can last much longer or even emerge later. Most people are able to slowly increase exercise time and intensity. What may be a low- or moderate-intensity activity for a healthy person may seem like a high-intensity activity for some cancer survivors. Keep in mind that moderate exercise is defined as activity that takes as much effort as a brisk walk.

When you are living disease-free or with stable disease

During this phase, physical activity is important to your overall health and quality of life. It may even help some people live longer. There's some evidence that getting to and staying at a healthy weight, eating right, and being physically active may help reduce the risk of a second cancer as well as other serious chronic diseases. More research is needed to be sure about these possible benefits.

The American Cancer Activity recommends that cancer survivors take these actions:

- ◆ Take part in regular physical activity.
- ◆ Avoid inactivity and return to normal daily activities as soon as possible after diagnosis.
- ◆ Aim to exercise at least 150 minutes per week.
- ◆ Include strength training exercises at least 2 days per week.



A growing number of studies have looked at the impact of physical activity on cancer recurrence and long-term survival. (Cancer recurrence is cancer that comes back after treatment.) Exercise has been shown to improve cardiovascular fitness, muscle strength, body composition, fatigue, anxiety, depression, self-esteem, happiness, and several quality of life factors in cancer survivors. At least 20 studies of people with breast, colorectal, prostate, and ovarian cancer have suggested that physically active cancer survivors have a lower risk of cancer recurrence and improved survival compared with those who are inactive. Randomized clinical trials are still needed to better define the impact of exercise on such outcomes.

Those who are overweight or obese after treatment should limit high-calorie foods and drinks, and increase physical activity to promote weight loss. Those who have been treated for digestive or lung cancers may be underweight. They may need to increase their body weight to a healthier range, but exercise and nutrition are still important. Both groups should emphasize vegetables, fruits, and whole grains. It's well known that obesity is linked with a higher risk of developing some cancers. It's also linked with breast cancer recurrence, and it might be related to the recurrence of other types of cancer, too. Exercise can help you get to and stay at a healthy weight.

Living with advanced cancer

Some level of physical activity can improve quality of life for people with certain types of cancer, even if the disease is advanced (has spread to many places and/or is no longer responding to treatment). But this varies by cancer type, physical ability, health problems related to the cancer or cancer treatment, and other illnesses. Physical activity should always be based on the person's goals, abilities and preferences. Plan for the unexpected in situations where a loved one has advanced cancer; stay positive, stay healthy, and stay active!

The physical therapists at Pearson Physical Therapy are here to help you and your loved ones improve strength, mobility and quality of life. Call 308-872-5800 to schedule and evaluation.