

Exercise and Breast Cancer



It is a well-known fact that physical activity has multiple benefits for people, young and old, not just for their physical health but their mental wellbeing too. This is no different for people who've been diagnosed or are being treated for or are recovering from breast cancer. From reducing fatigue to helping regain a sense of control and normalcy in their life, being active in some way will help you along this journey.

Movement is a key factor in both cancer prevention and returning to health. It doesn't have to involve a gym membership or fancy equipment to be active, it can be as simple as going for a walk around the block 15 minutes after dinner. There are many ways to make physical activity an enjoyable part of everyday life. Exercise has been shown to decrease the recurrence of cancer – from breast, colon and prostate cancers. It also decreases the risk of recurrence by 20–40%. Cancer-related fatigue is best treated with exercise: as strength and fitness improve, it becomes easier to do activities that are meaningful and important to you. Exercise also improves sleep and bone health. Before starting any type of activity, talk to your specialist team, doctor or physical therapist. You may need to build this up slowly,

monitoring how your body responds to the activity, as this may have changed since surgery or treatment.

BENEFITS OF EXERCISE

Regular physical activity can help maintain or improve your health during and after treatment.

Exercise can do many wonderful things for you; below are some examples.

- Help you to avoid or reduce some side effects of cancer treatment, such as fatigue, weight gain, osteoporosis (common with ageing and as a side effect from some medication) and lymphoedema. Yes, it may seem absurd or a contradiction to think that at a time when your body and mind are exhausted from your daily challenges with breast cancer that more physical activity would actually counter the fatigue – but it's true it does!
- Improve your long-term health, which reduces the risk of heart attack and stroke, and exercise may reduce the risk of cancer coming back.
- Help your mental wellbeing by reducing anxiety, stress, and depression and improving your mood. Exercise is shown to stimulate the release of endorphins. These are feel-good, happy hormones

that help combat stress, anxiety and depression. Endorphins also promote better quality sleep, which in turn supports a more positive mindset. Exercise can reduce cortisol levels (a hormone often elevated during anxious and stressful times), which can have negative effects on your immune function.

- Prevent or reduce the loss of muscle tone and general fitness that can happen during and after treatment. Muscle strength helps support movement and joints and may help minimise pain which can develop from lack of use and muscle wasting.

HOW MUCH EXERCISE IS ADVISED?

Generally, people who've had a breast cancer diagnosis are recommended to do the same amount of physical activity as



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the general population. This is obviously up to the individual and where they are in their journey through breast cancer treatment, as well as what level of activity they did before diagnosis. No one expects you to run a marathon unless that's what you did on a regular basis before! Don't be overwhelmed with expectations, doing anything is better than nothing, so start where you can and work from there.

International health guidelines suggest that adults should do at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity such as brisk walking (or 75 minutes of vigorous activity such as running) every week. They should also do muscle-strengthening activities at least two days a week.

Some treatments for breast cancer can make you feel very tired or unwell. If this is how you're feeling at the moment, don't worry about how much exercise you do. Even a small amount of activity will have benefits. Doing too much too quickly may set you back for days. If you struggle to do 150 minutes a week, start by trying to reduce the time you spend sitting down or being inactive and gradually increase this over time, from doing more daily chores at home or in the garden to simply walking down the street and back up again, before heading off around the block.

If you've just had breast surgery, check with your treatment team when you can

start exercising and what type of activity would be best for you.

WHERE TO START

As mentioned, this may depend on where you are or where you were. It's best to start slowly with an activity that you enjoy and gradually build up the amount you do. Enjoying what you do is more important than the activity itself. Enjoyment will help you stick with it and improve your mental outlook too.

For example, if you enjoy walking, start walking a short distance regularly. If you're managing this easily, gradually build up the distance, the number of times a day you walk, or the speed at which you walk. If the walk includes joining friends and sharing their company and support that's all the better.

Setting realistic goals, keeping a record of how much activity you do and sharing your progress with other people may help you stay motivated. This will help on those days when you feel overwhelmed and deflated with the challenge that lies ahead.

Exercise can be prescribed by a biokineticist, physical therapist or personal trainer. It can be something to do alone or in a group, such as Pilates, yoga or a dance class. It can include golf, cycling, swimming or a multitude of other sports – not just walking or running. If you are unsure,

chat to your doctor and medical team for guidance.

Starting a Walking Programme

Walking is a safe, inexpensive and great aerobic workout. Walking is also a gentle way to begin an exercise programme. When you walk, your arms move gently. Gentle arm movements are best. Keep the following in mind:

- Wear comfortable shoes.
- Be aware of your posture and breathing.
- Begin your walk well hydrated and drink fluids during and after.
- Warm-up by beginning your walk at a somewhat slower pace.
- Cool down by ending your walk at a somewhat slower pace.
- Start at a level that is safe and realistic for you, and gradually build up your duration and intensity.

MAKE EXERCISE PART OF YOUR DAY

There are many ways to include exercise in your daily routine, such as:

- energetic housework or gardening;
- parking your car a little further away from the shops or work and walking the rest of the way;
- getting off the bus a stop earlier than you need to and walk the rest of the way;
- using the stairs instead of taking the lift; and
- sitting less and standing more, for example, you could walk around when talking on the phone.

●● IF YOU ENJOY WALKING, START WALKING A SHORT DISTANCE REGULARLY ●●

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