

Exercising with cancer

How to get started

A varied exercise plan can significantly improve your health throughout diagnosis, treatment, recovery and survival. Regular exercise improves your cardiovascular health and reduces the risks of weight gain, obesity, diabetes, hypertension and stroke. It also significantly improves tiredness, depression, insomnia, mobility and recovery from surgery or radiation therapy. Some cancer medicines can affect heart health so maintaining an exercise plan helps you to minimise these effects. Your energy levels will increase, muscle strength will improve, and balance and coordination will be enhanced, so that you can more fully enjoy the activities of daily living.

Discuss with your doctor or cancer specialist about how regular exercise can help your overall health during treatment and in recovery. Plan your exercise activity, ensuring that you get maximum benefit from each type of exercise.

Take all medicines as recommended by your doctor or pharmacist.

Warm up and cool down

Always start your exercise session with a 10–15-minute warm up to loosen up the muscles and raise the heart rate safely. Warm-up exercises include simple stretches, range-of-motion activities and beginning the activity at a low intensity. They can be done standing up, walking around, marching on the spot or seated.

Always end your exercise session with a 10–15-minute cool down to ensure your heart rate and breathing return to normal safely. Cool-down exercises include simple stretches and slowly decreasing the intensity of your activity. You should feel relaxed but energised after exercise!

The exercises!

Cardiovascular/stamina exercises—get your heart rate up!

How often:	Aim for at least 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week, or 150 minutes a week in total. If you are new to exercise, start with 2–3 days a week and add additional sessions as your strength and stamina increase.
How hard:	Low to moderate intensity—aim to get slightly breathless. Take frequent breaks, if necessary.
How long:	Aim for at least 30–60 minutes. If your fitness level is low, start with 5–10-minute sessions and add 10-minute intervals until you can comfortably exercise for longer.
Type:	Try walking, cycling, jogging, dancing, gardening, swimming, step aerobics, spinning, roller skating, water aerobics, hiking—choose something you enjoy! Recreational team sports such as football, tennis, cricket and volleyball are great social activities too! Household activities such as cleaning, vacuuming and washing the car are also good cardiovascular activities.

What will it do for me?

Regular cardiovascular exercise significantly prevents cancer, improves survival, reduces symptoms and the side effects of treatments, and improves your overall health and wellbeing. It also helps reduce the risk of heart disease, obesity, stroke, diabetes and many other long-term diseases.

Strength exercises—use your muscles!

How often:	Twice a week.
How hard:	Start with light weights or resistance exercises.
How many:	Choose a variety of 8–10 exercises targeting the upper and lower body and repeat each exercise 10–15 times. Try 1–3 sets of each exercise.
Type:	A variety of strength and resistance exercises using free weights, resistance machines or household items such as a tin of beans or a weighted water bottle as a weight. Exercises may need to be modified if you have had surgery or treatments that have caused muscle weakness or limited your range of movement.

What will it do for me?

Strength exercises help you maintain and improve your ability to do everyday tasks comfortably and without feeling tired. They also help you maintain bone, muscle and joint health while improving your strength, balance and posture.

Flexibility exercises—stretch!

How often:	Twice a week.
How many:	Try 8–10 stretch exercises using the upper and lower body.
How long:	Hold each stretch for 10–30 seconds.
Type:	Try swimming, dancing, yoga, Tai Chi, gardening or a variety of home stretch exercises.

What will it do for me?

Regular gentle stretching improves muscle tone and the range of movement of the joints. It's also great for helping you to feel relaxed but energised, particularly when combined with breathing exercises. Ask a certified health and fitness cancer specialist to help advise you on the best stretching exercises for you!

Balance exercises—move with confidence!

How often:	Twice a week.
How many:	Try 2–3 balance exercises and repeat each exercise twice.
How long:	Hold each balance for 10 seconds.
Type:	Try yoga, Tai Chi, some types of martial art or simple home balance exercises. Balance exercise can be done standing up using a chair, against a wall or sitting down. Ensure the area you are exercising in and the type of balance exercise is safe.

What will it do for me?

Practising balance exercises helps to train your body to react more quickly to impending balance loss, thereby reducing the risk of falls, fractures and injuries. They also improve your posture.

Your exercise, your way!

Choose activities that are easy to start with, and that you enjoy. If walking is difficult, cycling, swimming and chair-based exercises are also excellent choices. Exercise with friends and family or join a group class. Try exercising both indoors and outdoors and see which you prefer!

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Exercise safety

Ask your doctor for information on how to exercise safely while you are having treatment and throughout recovery.

If you are having cancer treatment, choose suitable clothing to help reduce the risk of irritation and infection from perspiration.

If you feel fatigued, reduce the number of exercises you do. Try each exercise in 10 minutes slots with adequate rest in between. Alternatively, modify your exercise plan after discussion with your doctor or healthcare provider. You may also need to do this during treatment, in response to changes to your health, if you are anaemic, at risk of infection or bleeding.

Start with shorter sessions (e.g. 10–15 minutes) and slowly build up to the recommended level.

Aim to get slightly out of breath, but exercise sensibly and stop the activity if you feel unwell.

Always wear comfortable clothing and shoes that give good support. Take frequent breaks if necessary, and drink water before, during and after exercise.