



Cancer survivor Lt. Dennis Wischmeier and his son share a moment outside their home on Ford Island. (U.S. Navy photo by Blair Martin/Released)



Building Your Arsenal in the Battle Against Cancer: Physical Activity

The ability of physical activity to prevent or delay chronic illness is well-documented, but what if illness has already occurred? In the past, many practitioners recommended resting and avoiding physical activity while recovering from illness and this advice still holds true if you become short of breath, develop chest pain or a rapid heart rate, or experience pain while exercising. If you are able to exercise safely, however, recent studies indicate it may be time to get moving.

Exciting new research is being done on the benefits of physical activity among cancer survivors, including prevention of cancer recurrence, development of secondary cancer, and other chronic disease.¹ Physical activity can also help avoid muscle weakness and a reduced range of motion.



Regardless of what stage you are at in your battle against cancer, exercise may help improve both your physical function and quality of life.²

Physical Activity during Cancer Treatment

Physical activity during treatment may seem daunting, but multiple studies have indicated it is safe and can have numerous health benefits. Some of these benefits include¹:

- Better post-treatment bone health
- Improved muscle strength following treatment
- Enhanced quality of life measures

There are a few things to consider if you will be exercising during cancer treatment. The first is to speak with your healthcare team to determine the type, amount, and intensity of exercise that is right for you. The second is to understand that low-intensity or short-duration workouts may be appropriate, particularly if you were sedentary prior to starting treatment.¹ Remember that the main goal of physical activity during this stage is to maintain current levels of activity as much as possible. Even if bed rest is recommended for a period of time, range of motion exercises can help maintain muscle and joint mobility, as well as prevent depression.¹

Physical Activity during Cancer Recovery

Physical activity following cancer treatment can expedite the recovery process, and improve fitness. Individuals who have been diagnosed with cancer are at risk for other chronic diseases such as¹:

- Secondary cancers
- Cardiovascular disease
- Diabetes
- Osteoporosis

Exercise has been shown to reduce the risk of such chronic diseases by managing weight, improving cardiovascular health, and improving muscle strength. Although only certain cancer types have been studied, physical activity can also reduce the risk of recurring cancer and reduce cancer-related mortality.¹ Some research is even suggesting that exercise can have a direct impact on the tumor by preventing or slowing growth.³ As extra motivation, there are also immediate benefits so you do not have to wait to see the results of your hard work! Physical activity during the recovery phase can improve¹:

- Fatigue
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Self-esteem



- Happiness
- Physical, functional, and emotional quality of life

Considerations and Precautions

Physical activity can benefit most individuals who are currently coping with cancer or recovering from cancer, but there are precautions that are important to consider. Always consult your healthcare team before beginning a physical activity regimen, and extra caution should be used among survivors with¹:

- Anemia – exercise outside of activities of daily living should be delayed until the anemia is resolved.
- Compromised immune function – avoid public gyms or pools until white blood cell counts are at a safe level.
- Severe fatigue due to treatment – exercise should be limited to 10 minutes of light activity.
- Current radiation treatment – avoid chlorine exposure.
- Indwelling catheters or feeding tubes – avoid pools, lakes, and ocean water, as well as activities that work the muscles in the immediate area of the catheter.
- Multiple or uncontrolled comorbidities – your healthcare team can assist with ways to modify an exercise program to ensure safety.
- Weakness of the extremities or loss of balance – consider using stationary equipment such as exercise bicycles or working with a certified personal trainer or therapist for safety.

Additional Resources

Any level of physical activity can improve fitness and quality of life, as well as reduce the side effects of treatment, so whether you choose to work in your garden, take a walk, ride a bike, or go dancing, it is important to keep moving. Aim for 150 minutes of moderate exercise per week, plus at least two days of strength training. Visit the resources below to learn more about the benefits of physical activity and how you can incorporate exercise into your daily routine:

- The [Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center's Active Living](#) page offers guidance to select a workout routine that matches your specific fitness goals.
- The [National Cancer Institute](#) outlines current research and recommendations relating to physical activity and cancer.
- Check out [this fact sheet](#) for nutrition and physical activity guidelines for cancer survivors.
- The [American Cancer Society](#) provides additional information on the benefits of physical activity among cancer survivors, as well as tips for getting started, avoiding fatigue, and more.



References

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