

EXERCISE: During and After Breast Cancer

Exercise is an important part of maintaining your overall health and wellbeing during and after breast cancer treatments. Research shows that **exercise is safe for breast cancer survivors and can improve physical functioning**, quality of life and can reduce treatment-related side effects like fatigue, joint stiffness and weight changes. When performed correctly, exercise is **one of the most effective strategies** to build strength, improve fitness and increase the ability to do every day activities.

Exercise guidelines

 **1. Avoid Inactivity.** Return to normal daily activity levels as soon as possible

 **2. Build to 150+ minutes** of moderate to vigorous intensity **aerobic exercise** per week

 **3. Perform muscle strengthening** exercises **2+ days per week** (2-3 sets of 8-15 reps)

 **4. Perform stretches and balance exercises** on most days of the week

Strength & aerobic exercises

- **Strength training** is safe and recommended during and after breast cancer treatments, provided you do not have any lifting restrictions from your surgeon or any major shoulder motion restrictions. If you are unsure about this, speak to exercise specialist, physiotherapist or your medical team.
- **Aerobic exercise** is safe and recommended during and after breast cancer treatments, unless you have been specifically told not to do this by your medical team. Aim to perform aerobic exercise, like walking, every day and build up the time and intensity as your body adapts. If you are unsure about this, speak to an exercise specialist, physiotherapist or your medical team.

Considerations specific to breast cancer

After Surgery

- Follow the advice from your surgeon about exercise restrictions, rehabilitation exercises and the timing of your return to exercise.
- Guidelines and restrictions may differ depending on the type of surgery you have had and the your individual medical history.
- A physiotherapist or exercise specialist will be able to provide further individualized guidance.
- Additionally, the Canadian Cancer Society **“Exercises after Breast Surgery”** booklet has exercise recommendations for after your surgery.

Considerations specific to breast cancer continued...

During Chemotherapy or Radiation Therapy

- **Avoid inactivity** and follow any restrictions given to you by your oncologist or medical team.
- **Be consistent** and try to do some exercise each day; Even small amounts of exercise is beneficial.
- Include **aerobic exercise** (e.g. walking) on most days of the week and start with an amount that you can tolerate. **Slowly progress your exercise time.** Once you can tolerate 15-minutes per session, slowly increase exercise intensity (For example, if walking, increase a stroll to a brisk walk or add in a hill).
- Include **strength training** exercises 2+ times weekly. If you have had surgery or have restricted shoulder movement, **you should speak to a physiotherapist or exercise specialist prior to starting.**
- If treatment side effects are limiting your ability to exercise (e.g. fatigue), speak to an exercise specialist, physiotherapist or your medical team.

After Treatment

- Follow any post-treatment advice given by your medical team.
- It is normal to experience treatment side effects for weeks or months after your treatment ends.
- Speak to an exercise specialist, physiotherapist or your medical team if you are unsure how to manage treatment side effects or how to safely exercise.

Regaining shoulder function

It is common to **have reduced shoulder motion after surgery or radiation** and there are exercises that you can do to improve this. If you are having difficulty raising your arms above your head (front raise and/or side raise), speak to an exercise specialist, physiotherapist or your medical team.

Lymphedema

Lymphedema is swelling in the affected arm, hand or chest wall caused by a build-up of lymph fluid. It can occur after surgery or other treatments and warning signs include a feeling of fullness, puffiness or heaviness in your arm; decreased flexibility in your hand, wrist or arm; problems fitting your arm into sleeves; or redness or increased warmth.

If you notice any signs, **it is important to act quickly and discuss** this with your medical team. Aerobic exercise and progressive strength training are safe for most people with lymphedema and should not worsen or cause lymphedema if performed as recommended by an exercise specialist or physiotherapist.

Managing fatigue

Most people will experience fatigue at some point during or after cancer treatments. Try to stay as active as possible and ensure you do some movement daily. For more information, see our exercise & fatigue resource.

Exercise precautions

1. It is recommended that you **speak to an exercise specialist with cancer exercise training** or your medical team before becoming active at a moderate intensity if you have any of the following:

- **Currently inactive** or low activity levels (<60 minutes per week)
- One or more additional **chronic health conditions** (e.g. cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure not controlled by medication, osteoporosis, diabetes)
- **Concerns** about becoming more active
- A **negative response** after trying to become more active (e.g. high fatigue levels or pain)

2. **Precautions are required** if you have advanced cancer, low hemoglobin, low white blood cell counts, low platelets, high temperature, vomiting or diarrhea, pain, recent surgery, severe fatigue, lymphedema, bone metastases, osteoporosis or peripheral neuropathy. Speak to an exercise specialist or your medical team.

3. **STOP exercising immediately and call 9-1-1** if during exercise you experience pain or pressure in your chest or arms; severe shortness of breath; dizziness or fainting; or irregular or unusually rapid heartbeat.

More information

- For additional information visit the BC Cancer Exercise Support webpage bccancer.com (click Health Info → Coping with cancer → Exercise Support).
- **Exercise specialists** are Exercise Physiologists or Physiotherapists.
- **Exercise Physiologists with cancer exercise training** are available at no cost by calling HealthLink BC (dial 8-1-1) and asking for “Physical Activity Services for Cancer”.
- A **Physiotherapist** can be found at bcphysio.org and a **Certified Exercise Physiologist (CEP)** can be found at csep.ca. To ensure that the professional listed has cancer exercise training, search for “oncology” or “cancer” in the find-a-professional or member search section.