

EXERCISE: During and After Cancer Treatments

Regular exercise is recommended before, during and after cancer treatments. Research shows that exercise is safe for people who have been diagnosed with cancer. Exercise has many benefits, including improving your overall health and wellbeing, reducing your risk of developing chronic diseases and managing side effects associated with cancer and cancer treatments, such as fatigue.

Exercise is any activity requiring physical effort that is planned, structured, repetitive, and purposeful (For example, 20-minutes of brisk walking).

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

Types of exercise

AEROBIC

Increases heart rate & keeps it up for a period of time.
e.g. walking, cycling, swimming, running

STRENGTH

Involves moving limbs against resistance provided by dumbbells, bands, machines or your body weight.

FLEXIBILITY

Stretching of muscles to increase joint flexibility and prevent stiffness & injury.
e.g. stretching

BALANCE

Challenging your stability in a safe & controlled manner to reduce risk of falling.

Exercise intensity

- **Light-intensity** exercise may not noticeably increase your heart rate or breathing rate. You can talk normally and you can sing during the activity. It feels like a 1 to 3 out of 10 (0 = no exertion, 10 = maximal).
- **Moderate-intensity** exercise noticeably increases your heart rate and breathing rate. You can talk but you cannot sing during the activity. It feels like a 4 to 6 out of 10.
- **Vigorous-intensity** exercise will cause you to sweat and be 'out of breath'. It will be difficult. You can only speak a few words at a time and cannot sing during the activity. It feels like 7 to 8 out of 10 exertion.

EXERCISE:

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Exercise guidance

BEFORE treatments

Goal: Build physical function & strength

- Avoid inactivity
- Increase aerobic exercise time & intensity
- Perform strength training 2+ times weekly and include all major muscles
- Seek advice from an exercise specialist about specific exercises that may benefit you prior to treatment

DURING treatments

Goal: Maintain physical function & strength, prevent declines & manage treatment side effects (e.g. fatigue or joint stiffness)

- Avoid inactivity
- Follow any activity restrictions given to you by your surgeon, oncologist or medical team
- Be consistent and try to exercise daily
- Include aerobic exercise on most days of the week (small, tolerable amounts to start)
- Perform strength training 2+ times weekly
- If treatment side effects are limiting your ability to exercise (e.g. fatigue), speak to an exercise specialist or your medical team.

AFTER treatments

Goal: Re-build physical function & strength, manage and reduce treatment side effects

- Follow the 'during treatment' guidelines and slowly increase exercise time and intensity
- Build towards meeting the exercise guidelines of 150+ minutes of moderate-to-vigorous aerobic exercise & 2+ strength sessions / week.
- Treatment side effects may be present for weeks or months after your treatment ends. If these are interfering with or limiting your ability to exercise, speak to an exercise specialist or your medical team.

LONG-TERM Survivorship

Goal: Maintain physical function & strength, prevent other health issues.

- Build towards meeting the exercise guidelines of 150+ minutes of moderate-to-vigorous aerobic exercise & 2+ strength sessions / week.
- Once you are meeting the exercise guidelines, work to maintain these each week.

Getting started

If you are not currently active or you are irregularly active, start exercising slowly (5 to 10 minutes per session for aerobic exercise) at an intensity that you can tolerate (light to moderate aerobic exercise or light weights for strength training), and gradually build up your exercise time and exercise intensity. Building consistency is important – try to exercise every day, even if it is just for a short time. Try to record the details of your exercise (time & intensity) and how you felt afterwards (e.g. fatigue 5/10).

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.