

Five Steps to Managing Cancer-Related Weight Gain

For many cancer survivors, weight gain is an unwelcome side effect. But incorporating healthy lifestyle habits can help.

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While you may have been advised not to lose weight after a cancer diagnosis, it is more common to gain weight. This unwanted weight gain is often associated with a decrease in physical activity and exercise, often due to fatigue. Other physical restrictions related to surgery or low blood cell counts due to chemotherapy, which can cause fatigue, may also make you more sedentary. Medications such as steroids alter metabolism, and hormonal treatments, for both men and women, often increase body fat. Finally, emotional stress can lead to a desire for more high-fat and high-sugar foods.

It's important to understand the realities of what happens to the body as it battles cancer, but it's also essential to recognize that your body will respond positively to incorporating certain lifestyle changes. No matter your age, cancer type or treatment status, you can take positive steps. Cultivating healthy habits in all areas of your life—including stress management, enjoyment, sleep, connection with others and a sound diet and exercise plan—will not only help you feel better but may also lead to results on your scale. Start with these five steps:

1. Reduce Daily Sedentary Time

Try to move for one minute every hour you are awake. This will give you more energy as well as increase the number of calories you burn throughout the day. For example, simply by adding an extra 2,000 steps (about one mile) per day, you will burn an extra 100 calories—equal to losing an extra pound over a month.

2. Incorporate Strength Training

The more muscle you have, the more calories you will burn. Resistance training is beneficial for weight loss because it not only burns calories while you do it but also elevates your metabolism, resulting in more calories burned each day. Plus, building muscle improves strength needed for everyday activities.

3. Eat Fewer Calories Than You Need

Create a moderate calorie deficit so your body uses up stored fat for fuel. Calculate your estimated calorie burn (use an online calculator). Then aim to reduce daily calories by 300 if you're a woman and by 500 if you're a man—while maintaining a balanced, nutritional diet. Keep tabs on your calories with an online food tracker.

4. Focus on Hydration

Drinking enough water and other fluids helps reduce your appetite and supports your body's muscular, digestive and other systems. It also assists in flushing waste from the body and helps keep you more energetic. Hydration may also improve metabolism and how your body stores fat.

5. Manage Stress

When stressed, your body has a surge of adrenaline, triggering the release of cortisol, which makes us crave quick energy from sweet, salty and fatty foods. These release pleasure chemicals linked with stress relief. A regular stress management routine can help reduce these habits as well as improve energy, focus, memory and quality sleep.