Improving Muscle Strength

These gentle exercises can help you become stronger and more flexible.

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Cancer and its treatment can lead to a decline in muscle strength and function. Fatigue—not to mention pain—may cause you to be less active, and treatments such as chemotherapy and steroids can weaken muscles. This can affect your quality of life. For example, just taking a walk can become difficult if you have issues with balance.

Fortunately, simple exercises can improve muscular function and help rebuild lost muscle mass. You don't need a complex program—it's better to take the correct steps in small modules to build tolerance. (Consult your cancer care team before starting any fitness program to determine whether it is right for your needs.) Let's focus on three areas essential to movement: arm mobility, leg stability and knee strength.

ARMS

Benefits: Arm mobility and strengthening of biceps, shoulders and upper back

Bear hugs. Standing or seated upright, hold a 2-pound dumbbell in each hand

in front of you at shoulder level, and then cross your arms, as if giving yourself a hug. Do 10 reps, and then repeat the set. As you gain strength, you can build up to a faster momentum.

Bear hugsNina Uy

Arm rotations. Holding a dumbbell in each hand, stretch your arms outward at chest level and rotate them in a circular motion clockwise and counterclockwise. One rep is a full rotation clockwise and counterclockwise. Do a set of five reps, and then repeat with a set of 10 reps.

Arm rotationsNina Uy

LEGS

Benefits: Flexibility and balance

Standing marches. With your arms straight in front of you at shoulder level and your back straight, march in place. Do 10 reps, and then repeat the set.

Standing marchesNina Uy

Heel raises. Stand straight, with your feet shoulder-width apart and your hands on your waist or your arms extended outward at chest level. Raise your heels off the floor while keeping your knees straight. Hold the stance for five seconds, and then slowly lower your heels back to the floor. Do 10 reps, and then repeat the set.

KNEES

Benefits: Strengthening hamstrings and quads while improving balance and knee strength

Single-leg squats. Stand straight with your hands on your waist. Keeping your back straight, bend slightly into a half-sitting position while lifting one leg off the ground. Keep the standing leg balanced on the floor with your heel down. If you feel steady, descend so your hips are slightly lower than your knees, and slowly stand up. Do five slow reps on each leg. Repeat the set.

Single-leg squatsNina Uy

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