Keeping Fit During Treatment

Regular physical activity can relieve fatigue from cancer treatment.

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If you're experiencing fatigue as a side effect of cancer treatment, you may feel too tired to exercise. However, regular physical activity can actually give you more energy and make you feel less tired.

Other benefits of exercise include reduced anxiety and depression, better physical function and improved quality of life. Research also suggests that cancer patients who are more active have a lower risk of relapse and may live longer.

That's why the American Cancer Society recommends that people receiving cancer treatment should be as active as possible. Aim to do both aerobic activities that raise your heart rate and strengthening exercises that help maintain your muscles.

If you don't currently get much exercise, start slowly and build up gradually. Start with low-intensity activities, like stretching and short walks. Split up activities into 15- or 30-minute periods and spread them throughout the week. If you're very tired, try doing 10 minutes of light exercise—even a small amount of activity is better than none.

If you've been sitting—at your desk in front of your computer, on the couch watching TV or behind the wheel of a car—for an hour or more, take a break and do something more active. Interrupting long periods of sitting will help keep your muscles, bones and joints strong.

Most activities are safe, but it's important to ask your doctor about restrictions. For example, if you have cancer in your bones, you may need to avoid high-impact exercises that could result in fractures. If you're receiving radiation, skip swimming because chemicals in pool water can irritate your skin. If chemotherapy has damaged the nerves in your feet, be careful with activities that require balance.

You don't have to buy fancy equipment or join a health club to keep active. There are lots of ways to integrate physical fitness into your daily routine at home and in your neighborhood. The key is to choose activities you enjoy and that fit into your life—that way you'll keep them going even after you've finished treatment.

10 Tips for Staying Active

1. Take the stairs instead of using the elevator.
2. Take a walk in your everyday clothes—you don’t need sportswear.
3. Participate in active play with your children, grandchildren or pets.
4. Be more active around the house—get some cooking or chores done.
5. Do some gardening—bending and digging provide a good workout.
6. Perform strengthening exercises using water bottles or cans as weights.
7. Walk or bike to work, to shop or to see friends.
8. Follow exercise videos on YouTube.
9. Take a yoga, tai chi or qi gong class.
10. Go dancing with friends.

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