Living With Cancer

Staying Fit When You Have Cancer

Getting more exercise may be the last thing on your mind when you're being treated for cancer. But finding a way to remain active and stay fit before, during and after treatment can not only help you feel better—it may also contribute to a successful outcome.

If you're experiencing fatigue as a side effect of cancer treatment, you may feel too tired to exercise. Although it seems counterintuitive, regular physical activity can boost your energy. A meta-analysis of 34 studies, for example, showed that exercise significantly reduces fatigue, regardless of the type or stage of cancer.

A growing body of evidence confirms that exercise can have many other benefits as well. These include fewer and less severe side effects, reduced anxiety and depression, better physical function and an improved quality of life. For example, one study showed that people with lung cancer who participated in exercise programs for a few weeks before surgery experienced only about half as many complications. 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 activities that help maintain your muscles.

The overall goal for physical activity is the same for people with or without cancer, although individual recommendations should be tailored to each person's ability. Aim for a total of 150 minutes a week—about 30 minutes five times a week—of moderate-intensity activity such as brisk walking, bicycling with light effort or recreational swimming. If you're able to do more vigorous exercise—such as jogging, faster biking or lap swimming—aim for 75 minutes a week. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides a list of moderate and vigorous activities. It's also important to include at least two sessions of resistance exercise, such as weight-lifting, in your overall weekly minutes.

If you don't currently exercise much, 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 spread 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 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. Breaking up 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 activities that could result in fractures, like running or jumping. If you’re receiving radiation, you may want to 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 gym to keep active. There are lots of ways to work physical activity 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 doing them even after you’ve completed treatment.

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