



PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Exercise for Cancer Survivors: Level 1

This information explains how you can get enough exercise after your cancer treatment. This resource is for cancer survivors who do not currently exercise.

Physical Activity and Exercise

Physical activity is any movement of the body that uses energy. Some of your daily life activities such as doing active chores around the house, yard work, or walking the dog are examples of physical activity..

Exercise is a type of physical activity in which you do body movements that are planned, structured, and repetitive in order to improve or maintain your physical fitness level. To get the health benefits of exercise, include activities that make you breathe harder such as brisk walking, running, dancing, swimming, and playing basketball. Strengthening exercises, such as push-ups and lifting weights, can make your muscles stronger.

Benefits of Exercise for Cancer Survivors

Exercise may help to:

- Decrease the risk of developing certain cancers, such as breast and colon cancer.
- Lower the risk of cancer recurrence (the cancer coming back). This is especially important for people with a history of breast and colorectal cancer.
- Improve overall cardiovascular (heart) health.
- Control weight and improve body image.
- Improve quality of life and overall psychological well-being.
- Maintain healthy bones, muscles, and joints.
- Improve the ability to perform activities of daily living.
- Prevent falls.

Recommended Amount of Exercise for Cancer Survivors

Experts recommend the following:

- If you are just starting to exercise, try to get at least 150 minutes every week.
 - You can do this by exercising for 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week. The table in the section “Exercise Intensity Levels” gives examples of moderate-intensity exercise.
- Two to 3 sessions per week of strength training that includes your major muscle groups. Your major muscle groups are your chest, shoulders, arms, back, abdomen, and legs. Strength training activities include push-ups, sit-ups,

using resistance bands, and lifting weights.

- Stretching your major muscle groups at least 2 times a week.

As part of a healthy lifestyle, you should do general physical activity daily. You should also avoid long periods of not moving, such as sitting for hours at a time.

Exercise Intensity Levels

Light-intensity Exercise	Moderate-intensity Exercise	Vigorous-intensity Exercise
Leisurely biking	Biking on level ground with hills	Biking faster than 10 miles per hour
Slow walking	Brisk walking	Race walking, jogging, running
Light housework	Gardening	Aerobics or fast dancing
T'ai Chi	Yoga	High intensity yoga or Pilates
Playing catch	Doubles tennis	Singles tennis
Bowling	Water aerobics	Swimming (fast pace or laps)

Before You Start Exercising

Talk with your oncologist (cancer doctor) or Survivorship Nurse Practitioner (NP) before you start any new exercise plan. They will help you to determine if you have any conditions that may affect which exercises you can do. They may recommend that you get a medical evaluation or meet with a

trained exercise specialist, such as a physical therapist (PT), cancer rehabilitation specialist, or certified trainer.

Conditions that may affect what exercises you can do include:

- Unsteady walk (unsteady gait)
- Having a low red blood cell count (anemia)
- Severe fatigue (feeling unusually tired, weak, or as though you have no energy)
- Infection
- Not getting enough nutrients or vitamins in your diet
- Poor bone health or osteoporosis
- Arthritis
- Problems with your muscles or bones
- Peripheral neuropathy (tingling or numbness in your hands and feet)
- Having an ostomy or central venous catheter (CVC)
- Uncontrolled heart or lung disease
- History of lung surgery or major abdominal surgery
- Lymphedema in the limb(s) that you're using to do resistance or strength training exercises

Starting to Exercise

Think about reasons why you haven't been exercising. Then try to come up with some ways to get past what is keeping you

from getting exercise. For example:

- **I haven't been active in a very long time.** Start at a comfortable level and add a little more activity as you go along. Choose something you like to do. Many people find walking helps them get started. Before you know it, you will be doing more each day. Some people also find that getting active with a friend makes it easier to get started.
- **I don't have the time.** Start with 10-minute chunks of time a few days a week. Walk during a break. Dance in the living room to your favorite music. It all adds up.
- **It costs too much money.** You don't have to join a gym or buy fancy equipment to be active. Play tag with your kids. Walk briskly with your dog for 10 minutes or more.

Build Up Over Time

- Start by doing what you can, and then look for ways to do more. If you have not been active for a while, start out slowly. After several weeks or months, build up your activities by doing them for longer and more often.
- Walking is one way to add exercise to your life. When you first start, walk 10 minutes a day for a few days a week. Do this for the first 2 weeks. Then, start walking for a little longer. Try 15 minutes instead of 10 minutes. Then walk more days a week.
- Once you can walk easily for 15 minutes several days a week, try walking faster. Keep up your brisk walking for a couple of

months. You may want to add biking on the weekends for variety.

Tips for Success

- Pick an activity you like and one that fits into your life.
- Find the time that works best for you.
- Be active with friends and family. Having a support network can help you keep up with your program.
- There are many ways to build the right amount of activity into your life. Every little bit adds up and doing something is better than doing nothing.
- Set short-term and long-term goals.
 - For example, your short-term goal could be to walk around your neighborhood for 15 minutes on 3 different days.
 - Your long-term goal could be to slowly add more time and days until you are walking 30 minutes per day, 5 days per week.
- Track your time and progress on a chart. There is a chart at the end of this resource that you can use, or you may want to use an app on your phone or tablet to monitor your progress.
- Plan your activity for the week. Experts say that spreading aerobic activity out over at least 3 days a week is best.
- Join a fitness group.

- Talk with your healthcare provider about good activities to try.
- Try new activities that you haven't done before
- Find an exercise you enjoy. Focus on having fun.
- Slowly add more time, intensity, and effort to your exercise sessions.
- Try to include exercises that uses large muscle groups, such as your thighs, abdomen, chest, and back.
- Start with warm-up exercises for about 2 to 3 minutes.
 - For example, you can do shoulder shrugs, march in place, or knee lifts. End your exercise session with light stretching.
- Recognize and reward your achievements.
 - For example, if you reach your exercise goal, reward yourself by purchasing new exercise clothing or a new book.
- Stay safe and avoid injuries. Choose activities that are appropriate for your fitness level and use the right safety gear and sports equipment.

How to Add Exercise to Your Daily Routine

- Walk around your neighborhood after dinner. If the weather is bad, you can walk around in a mall.
- Ride your bike. If it's cold out, you can get a bike trainer. This tool converts your regular bike into a stationary bike

that you can use indoors.

- Mow the grass or rake the leaves instead of using a blower.
- Scrub your bathroom.
- Wash and wax your car.
- Play active games with your kids, such as freeze tag or jump rope.
- Weed your garden.
- Take a friend dancing, or dance in your own living room.
- Use a treadmill, or do arm curls, squats, or lunges while watching TV.
- Walk to lunch.
- Park your car in the furthest parking spot and walk to your destination.
- Use the stairs instead of the escalator or elevator.
- Get off the bus several stops early and walk the rest of the way to your destination.
- Make appointments for yourself in your planner for 10-minute walking breaks.
- Form a walking club with friends.
- Wear a pedometer every day to try to increase your daily steps.

Memorial Sloan Kettering (MSK) Resources

MSK has several resources that show you how to add exercises

to your daily life:

Video that encourages cancer survivors to exercise and shows simple exercises that they can do.

www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/survivorship/videos-survivors/exercise-survivors

Video that shows simple exercises to strengthen your major muscle groups and boost your heart rate.

www.mskcc.org/videos/strengthening-exercises

Video that explains how exercise can have positive effects on your health during cancer survivorship, and offers recommendations about how to exercise safely and stick with a routine.

www.mskcc.org/videos/playlist/importance-exercise-survivorship

Video that explains how exercise can have positive effects on your health and offers recommendations about how to exercise safely and stick with it.

www.mskcc.org/videos/benefits-exercise-survivors

Video that explains exercise safety issues if you have lymphedema, cancer that spread to your bone osteoporosis, brain tumors, loss of sensation in your arms or legs, or low blood cell counts.

www.mskcc.org/multimedia/exercise-safety-issues-survivors

Blogpost that discusses what cancer survivors should know

about exercise during and after treatment.

www.mskcc.org/blog/what-are-benefits-exercise-during-and-after-treatment

Charts to Track Your Activity

Day of the week	Activity and intensity	Minutes of exercise
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		
Total for the week		

Strengthening exercise

Day of the week	Activity
Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	
Thursday	
Friday	
Saturday	
Sunday	

Total for the week

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Exercise for Cancer Survivors: Level 1 - Last updated on June 8, 2017
©2019 Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center