



PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Exercise for Cancer Survivors: Level 2

This information explains how you can get enough exercise after your cancer treatment.

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 and prevent falls.

Recommended Amount of Exercise for Cancer Survivors

Experts recommend the following:

- At least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity exercise. The table in the section “Exercise Intensity levels” gives examples of moderate- and vigorous intensity exercise.
 - You can do this by exercising for 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week at a moderate intensity or for 15 minutes, 5 days a week at a vigorous intensity.
 - In general, 15 minutes of vigorous-intensity exercise provides the same benefits as 30 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise.
 - You can combine the moderate- and vigorous-intensity exercise. For example, you could do 3 days of moderate-intensity exercise for 30 minutes each day and 2 days of vigorous-intensity exercise for 15 minutes each day.
- 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 2 to 3 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 several 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)

Increasing Your Exercise

- Talk with your oncologist (cancer doctor) or Survivorship Nurse Practitioner (NP) before you increase your exercise level if you experience a worsening or changing condition (such as your lymphedema getting worse).
- If you're already meeting the weekly exercise goals, you can gain even more health benefits by slowly adding more time to your weekly routine. Make a goal of doubling your weekly exercise time to 5 hours.
- Instead of doing only moderate-intensity exercises, replace some of it with vigorous-intensity exercises that will make your heart beat even faster. Adding vigorous-intensity exercise provides benefits in less activity time. If you want stronger muscles, you can also try increasing your strength training from 2 to 3 days a week.

Tips for Success

- Pick an activity that you like that fits into your life.
- Set short-term and long-term goals. For example, you can plan to run 1 mile a day for a week, and then work your way up to 3 miles.
- Consider using a pedometer, which tracks your steps, or a wearable fitness tracker. These will help to monitor your progress.
- 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.
- Join a fitness group.
- Talk to your healthcare provider about good activities to try.
- Try new activities that you haven't done before.
- Find an exercise you enjoy.
- Slowly add more time, intensity, and effort to your exercise sessions.
- Try to include exercise 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.

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 days 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 2 - Last updated on June 8, 2017

©2019 Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center