



PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Low-intensity exercise

This information describes the common uses of Low-intensity exercise, how it works, and its possible side effects.

Tell your healthcare providers about any dietary supplements you're taking, such as herbs, vitamins, minerals, and natural or home remedies. This will help them manage your care and keep you safe.

What is it?

Because low-intensity exercise is low-impact, it avoids stress on the joints while still providing therapeutic benefits that come from deeper breathing, coordinating movements, and other forces like weight and resistance. Although it may take longer to see results with low-intensity over high-intensity exercise for things like weight loss or physical conditioning, these activities have important added benefits like reducing risk for injury and helping to improve mobility, stamina, and stability. For example, because resistance training increases strength, it improves balance which reduces fall risk.

What are the potential uses and benefits?

Anxiety and mood

In patients receiving chemotherapy, home-based low-intensity exercise improved anxiety and mood, especially in those who had worse symptoms at baseline.

Balance

Regular practice of [yoga](#) and [tai chi](#) have been shown to improve balance.

Fall and fracture risk

Activities including walking and [tai chi](#) have been shown to reduce fall and fracture risk.

Fatigue

In a study of cancer survivors, light-intensity activity improved fatigue, cardiorespiratory fitness, and physical functioning, while slowing functional decline.

Heart health

Regular physical activity is known to benefit heart health, and emerging evidence also shows light-intensity activity can reduce heart disease risk. Although more study in this area is needed, it highlights the fundamental importance of maintaining regular activity.

Pain and treatment-related symptoms

Clinical trials of [yoga](#) and [tai chi](#) indicate these practices are useful for reducing pain and inflammation. In patients undergoing chemotherapy, both a low-intensity home-based program and moderate-to-high-intensity exercise improved fitness and functioning, and reduced nausea and pain versus usual care.

Reducing cancer risk

A meta-analysis determined that both light and high-intensity exercise significantly reduced breast cancer risk, although high-intensity exercise was slightly more protective.

Sleep

Regular practice of [yoga](#) and [tai chi](#) have been shown to improve sleep quality.

What else do I need to know?

What Is It:

Activities done at a comfortable pace such as walking, swimming, biking, rowing, dance, resistance training, using an elliptical machine, other low-impact aerobics, or mind-body movement practices can be considered low-intensity

exercise.

Most data are on moderate to vigorous activity, but low-intensity exercise also improves mood, mobility, and cardiorespiratory fitness, while reducing fatigue, pain, and risk for injury.

Certain types of low-intensity exercise like [tai chi](#), [qigong](#), and [yoga](#) also reduce fall risk and improve sleep quality in cancer survivors.

Low-intensity exercise can be an important bridge to American Cancer Society recommendations of at least 150 minutes of moderate activity and 2 days of resistance training weekly. And activities can be performed at more intense levels later, as physical condition gradually improves.

Practice, patience, and choosing activities you enjoy can help you stick to your exercise regimens.

Importantly, cancer patients should check with their healthcare professionals about what they can do, what to avoid, and to get appropriate referrals to help maintain or improve physical activity. It's also important to listen to your body. [Exercising with cancer fitness experts and others who have like-minded goals can also help keep up your physical activity safely.](#)

Special Point:

- Low-intensity exercise is always low-impact, meaning it minimizes how much stress you put on your joints. However, not all low-impact exercise is low-intensity. For example, low-impact high-intensity cardio works the heart at a higher rate while still avoiding joint stress.
- Even seasoned athletes regularly use low-intensity exercise to reduce injury risk and prepare the body for more intense activity.

Is It Safe:

Low-intensity exercises are generally safe and appropriate for most fitness levels, with the added benefit of reducing risk for injury and improving recovery time. Patients with joint pain, balance problems, or injuries can particularly

benefit from low-intensity forms of exercise. Still, cancer patients who are undergoing active treatment or have just had surgery should check with their healthcare provider to determine when to safely resume activity and which types of exercises are safe to perform.

Who Can Provide this Service:

In addition to physical rehabilitation, hospitals may offer [online videos](#), [workshops](#), or [continuing courses](#) with clinical fitness specialists to help patients safely maintain or return to regular activity. These experts may focus on particular areas of concern such as [regaining shoulder mobility after surgery](#), [safely increasing flexibility and heart rate](#), or [addressing muscle weakness](#). Some videos may also demonstrate [multiple levels of the same exercise](#) so that both a person who cannot stand and another person who needs more weight resistance can benefit from the same demonstration.

Where Can I Get Treatment:

MSK offers exercise classes at all levels for our patients and caregivers. Free introductory courses to get started can be found on our [MSK YouTube Channel](#). We also offer [single and series workshops](#) focusing on specific types of exercise and mind-body practices. And our online membership program, [Integrative Medicine at Home](#), offers low-cost virtual classes to help support the recovery and well-being of cancer patients everywhere.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

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

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