

## FEATURE STORY

# After Treatment: Exercise & Recovery

*Physical activity can help improve mental and physical functioning after cancer treatment*

Once cancer therapy has been completed, the next phase of cancer survivorship is recovery. A program of regular exercise is a great way to improve your overall fitness and sense of well-being. Studies also suggest physical activity may be important for reducing the risk of recurrence (cancer coming back) and helping some cancer survivors live longer.

How much and what kind of physical activity you can do depends on your diagnosis, treatment history, and your overall health. Several clinical trials have assessed the effect of exercise on quality of life and other measures of well-being in cancer survivors. The exercise programs in these studies were primarily three days of moderate to vigorous activity per week, working up to 45-minute sessions over a period of three or four months. These studies show that such exercise programs can reduce anxiety and depression, improve mood, boost self-esteem, and reduce symptoms of fatigue.

Although you can likely start an exercise program after checking with your health care team, you may benefit from talking with an exercise specialist. Look for someone who is certified by an exercise-related professional organization such as the American College of Sports Medicine, which recently launched a new cancer specialty certification in collaboration with the American Cancer Society. People who are interested in finding a certified trainer can ask at their local health clubs or use the ACSM ProFinder service at [www.acsm.org](http://www.acsm.org) under the “Certification” tab, or call 317-637-9200, extension 115.

A physical therapist is the appropriate resource if you have injuries, pain, or specific post-surgical issues, such as lymphedema or amputation. Exercise physiologists receive college training and are certified by various professional organizations to develop individualized exercise programs. Personal trainers are also popular choices if you want to increase your fitness and activity levels. Recommendations on the type, frequency, duration, and intensity of exercise should be personalized to your age, previous fitness activities, type of cancer, type of therapy, and other illnesses you may have.

Be aware that side effects of treatment may increase the risk for exercise-related injuries and problems. Specific precautions include:

**Survivors with severe anemia** should delay exercise, other than activities of daily living, until the anemia improves.

**Survivors with compromised** immune function should avoid public gyms and other public places until their white blood cell counts return to safe levels. Survivors who have completed a stem cell transplant are usually advised to avoid such exposures for one year after transplantation.

**Survivors suffering from** severe fatigue may not feel up to an exercise program, so they may be encouraged to do 10 minutes of stretching exercises daily.

**Survivors with indwelling** catheters should avoid water or other exposures that may result in infections, as well as resistance training of muscles in the area of the catheter to avoid dislodgment.

**Survivors with significant** peripheral neuropathies or problems with balance and coordination (ataxia) may have a reduced ability to use the affected limbs because of weakness or loss of balance. They may do better with a stationary reclining bicycle, for example, than walking on a treadmill.

For the general adult population, the American Cancer Society recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity at least five days per week to reduce the risk for cancer, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes. These levels of activity have not been studied systematically in cancer survivors, but aside from specific circumstances related to treatment or other cancer-specific conditions, experts say there is no reason to think these recommendations would not also be beneficial for cancer survivors. Although daily regular activity may be a goal, any steps you take to move from a sedentary to an active lifestyle are encouraged.

*Adapted with permission of the American Cancer Society*