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# Exercise

For people with cancer



## This patient guide will help you understand:

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This guide is for people before, during and after cancer treatment. It does not replace the advice from your health care team.

# How can exercise help me?

## Exercise can help you feel better while you are getting treatment for cancer. It:

- gives you more energy
- lessens fatigue (tiredness)
- makes you stronger
- helps to keep your bones healthy
- helps you sleep better
- keeps your heart healthy
- improves your mood
- lessens your feelings of anxiety and depression
- helps to manage your stress

## Starting an exercise routine

### Talk to your health care team before starting a new exercise routine:

- It is never too early or too late in your treatment to start exercising.
- **If you do not already exercise:** Do some light exercise instead of sitting or lying down. Start with something small or something in your normal routine like walking at a mall or walking your dog.
- **If you already exercise:** Fatigue or lack of energy might make it hard to keep your regular routine. Add more exercise every day until you are back to your normal routine.
- **If you have metastatic cancer in your bones:** Talk to your oncologist before starting to exercise.



## Tip:

10 minutes of light exercise each day can help you feel better.

## HOW CAN EXERCISE HELP ME?



## Tips to help you get started

- Choose exercises you enjoy doing.
- Choose some exercises that get your heart rate up and others that build strength and flexibility. Do strength training 2 days each week.
- Even short exercise sessions of 5 minutes a few times a day are good for your body and help you reach your fitness goals.
- **For the best fitness, exercise for 30 minutes 5 times a week.**

“There will be days when you don’t feel like exercising, but don’t give up! After a year of sticking with it, I’m now able to meet my weekly exercise goals.”

- Patient and Family Advisor, Cancer Care Ontario

## Do exercise that feels right for you

- Exercise on your own or in a group. Exercising with others may give you the support you need to keep doing it.
- Some hospitals and community organizations have group exercise programs for people with cancer.
- Do exercise that is not too easy or too hard for you. You should be able to talk but not sing while doing the exercise.
- You can still exercise if you have limited mobility or trouble with standing and balance. Many exercises can be adapted or done while sitting, such as:
  - seated yoga, Pilates or dancing
  - using an arm cycle or resistance bands
  - swimming or water aerobics
- It is important to keep your body moving no matter what level of ability you have.
- Exercise at your own pace. Think about your energy level and do activities that feel comfortable.

# What type of exercise is right for me?

## Aerobic exercise

**Aerobic exercise is sometimes called cardio. It:**

- gets your heart-rate up
- makes you breathe faster
- pumps blood and oxygen to your muscles and tissues



## Light exercise (easiest)

Light aerobic exercise should feel easy. It includes:

- slow walking
- slow bike riding
- gentle swimming
- light housework like dusting or sweeping
- light gardening

## Moderate exercise (medium)

Moderate aerobic exercise should feel like a challenge. It includes:

- brisk walking
- bike riding with some hills
- swimming
- ball sports like volleyball, softball or tennis
- yoga
- ballroom dancing

## Intense exercise (hardest)

Intense exercise should feel like you are pushing yourself very hard. It includes:

- running, jogging, race walking
- fast bike riding
- hiking
- competitive sports like soccer or basketball
- stair climbing

## Resistance or strength training

**Resistance or strength training improves your muscle strength:**

You can do strength training using

- free weights, like dumbbells or barbells, and household items like soup cans
- resistance bands
- weight machines
- your own body weight, like push ups
- Strength training is often done in repetitions (reps) and sets. A rep is a single movement. A set is a group or series of reps.

For example, 30 bicep curls can be broken down into 3 sets of 10 biceps curls. Be sure to rest in between sets.



## Light strength training (easiest):

- Use a small amount of weight (light dumbbell or kettle bell) or resistance (loose resistance band or tube). If you are a beginner, start slowly. You should be able to comfortably do many reps.

## Moderate strength training (medium):

- Add more reps into your set to make the exercise harder. When you are ready, add more sets.
- If you still want more of a challenge you can add more weight.

## Intense strength training (hardest):

- This type of strength training is when you push yourself as hard as you can.
- Do intense training only with a qualified exercise professional to make sure you are doing it safely.

# How can I exercise safely?

Exercising before, during and after cancer treatment is safe for most people. Ask your health care team if you need to change your exercise routine to make it safe.

- If you have metastatic cancer in your bones, talk to your health care team before starting an exercise program.
- Warm up for a few minutes before you exercise to get your muscles moving. Good warm-up activities are marching on the spot, stretching, walking and gentle arm circles.
- Cool down after you exercise with light exercises, (like those from your warm-up) and stretching.
- Respect your pain and fatigue levels and only do what feels good and safe.
- Ask your surgeon about exercises to help your body recover and when it is safe to go back to your pre-surgery exercise routines.
- Most people can return to their regular exercise routine in about 4 to 8 weeks.

## Stop exercising if you feel:

- dizzy
- short of breath
- chest pain
- new pain or more pain than usual
- new or more swelling in your arm(s) or leg(s)
- increased fatigue and/or decreased energy
- more sweaty than normal, for no reason

**If you have any changes in your body after exercising that are not normal for you, tell your health care team at your next visit.**

# How to set goals for exercise?

Setting goals for exercise gives you something to work towards and can keep you motivated. To help set your goals, ask yourself what activities are important to you and what do you want to be able to do?



## Examples of things that might be important to you:

- I want to be able to play with my grandchild in the pool.
- I want to do a 5 km charity walk next fall.
- I want to be able to walk up the stairs by myself.

## You can also use smaller goals to work up to achieving your bigger goal. For example:

- You might start with this goal: I will walk 3 times a week for at least 20 minutes each time.
- When you achieve the first goal, you might change it to: I will walk 4 times a week for at least 30 minutes each time.

## Making your goals SMART can help you achieve them

The example of the 5 km walk is a SMART goal. A SMART goal should be:

- **Specific** – say exactly what you hope to do (walk for 5 km)
- **Measurable** – easy to tell if you have done it or not (you will know if you completed the walk)
- **Attainable** – realistic to achieve (you can already walk 2 km and you think that walking 5 km is something you will be able to do)
- **Relevant** – important to you (the walk is something you have done and enjoyed in the past)
- **Time-based** – put a time frame around the goal (the walk is next fall)

To keep track of your exercise goals,  
fill in your daily exercise below:

**Week 1**

**Monday**

Minutes: \_\_\_\_\_  
Type: \_\_\_\_\_  
Intensity: \_\_\_\_\_

**Tuesday**

Minutes: \_\_\_\_\_  
Type: \_\_\_\_\_  
Intensity: \_\_\_\_\_

**Wednesday**

Minutes: \_\_\_\_\_  
Type: \_\_\_\_\_  
Intensity: \_\_\_\_\_

**Thursday**

Minutes: \_\_\_\_\_  
Type: \_\_\_\_\_  
Intensity: \_\_\_\_\_

**Friday**

Minutes: \_\_\_\_\_  
Type: \_\_\_\_\_  
Intensity: \_\_\_\_\_

**Saturday**

Minutes: \_\_\_\_\_  
Type: \_\_\_\_\_  
Intensity: \_\_\_\_\_

**Sunday**

Minutes: \_\_\_\_\_  
Type: \_\_\_\_\_  
Intensity: \_\_\_\_\_

**Week 2**

**Monday**

Minutes: \_\_\_\_\_  
Type: \_\_\_\_\_  
Intensity: \_\_\_\_\_

**Tuesday**

Minutes: \_\_\_\_\_  
Type: \_\_\_\_\_  
Intensity: \_\_\_\_\_

**Wednesday**

Minutes: \_\_\_\_\_  
Type: \_\_\_\_\_  
Intensity: \_\_\_\_\_

**Thursday**

Minutes: \_\_\_\_\_  
Type: \_\_\_\_\_  
Intensity: \_\_\_\_\_

**Friday**

Minutes: \_\_\_\_\_  
Type: \_\_\_\_\_  
Intensity: \_\_\_\_\_

**Saturday**

Minutes: \_\_\_\_\_  
Type: \_\_\_\_\_  
Intensity: \_\_\_\_\_

**Sunday**

Minutes: \_\_\_\_\_  
Type: \_\_\_\_\_  
Intensity: \_\_\_\_\_

# Who can I talk to about exercise?

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## **If you need help with exercise, talk to:**

- a physiotherapist, occupational therapist or a qualified exercise professional who is trained to work with people with cancer
- your family doctor
- your cancer health care team

## **Ask your exercise professional some questions about their experience in helping people with cancer:**

- What type of training or certifications do you have?
- Do you have training for working with people with cancer?
- Do you know of any exercise programs for people with cancer in our community?
- Can you recommend a routine for me that is safe?

**If you have questions or concerns about exercise, speak to your health care team.**

## **What is a qualified exercise professional?**

- Exercise professionals in Ontario can have different names depending on their training.
- Registered Kinesiologists and Certified Exercise Physiologists (CEP) have university education about how the body works.
- It is important that your exercise professional has training or certifications for working with people with cancer.

### **Tip:**

Ask your health care team, "Is there any person, group or class that can help me reach my exercise goals?"

# Where can I get more information?

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For more links to helpful information go to [www.cancercareontario.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercareontario.ca/symptoms)

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the Patient and Family Advisors and the Clinical Advisory Group who worked on this guide.

This patient guide was created by Cancer Care Ontario to provide you with information about exercise when you have cancer. It should be used for information only and does not replace medical advice. This guide does not include all information about exercise when you have cancer. Always ask your health care team if you have questions or concerns. The information in this guide does not create a physician-patient relationship between Cancer Care Ontario and you.

## Need this information in an accessible format?

1-855-460-2647 | TTY (416) 217-1815 | [publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca](mailto:publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca)

For other patient guides please go to:

[www.cancercareontario.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercareontario.ca/symptoms)

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