

MOVEMENT AND CANCER

FAST FACTS

- Exercise during cancer has been shown to improve fatigue, mood, muscle strength, and pain tolerance.¹
- The American College of Sports Medicine recommends some level of physical activity for all cancer survivors.²
- Just 30 minutes of moderate-intensity movement, such as brisk walking (3-4 mph) most days of the week, can reduce cancer risk.³

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND CANCER

Resting to conserve energy may seem like the right thing to do when you have cancer. After all, the body and mind are facing the stresses of diagnosis, treatment, and side effects. In the past, doctors did not generally recommend physical activity for people with cancer. But that has changed. Today, your treatment plan is much more likely to include some form of exercise.

You know your body best, so listen to it. Some days you will feel able to do more than others. If you are looking for ways to be active when you have cancer or research on specific benefits, the American College of Sports Medicine is one helpful source of [free resources](#) for you and your doctor.

Aerobic endurance, strength, and flexibility are important benefits of being physically active during and after treatment. Endorphins released during exercise can reduce pain,⁴ while fresh air and solitude can provide a break from feeling like a patient rather than a person.

Yoga, tai chi, and other gentle forms of exercise can restore and even boost energy. Today, physical movement is recommended to virtually everyone who is receiving treatment or is a cancer survivor.

THE EXAMPLE OF LYMPHEDEMA

Lymphedema is a painful swelling that can happen in an arm or leg after removal of lymph nodes to treat cancer. In the past, doctors advised people to avoid arm exercises after underarm lymph node removal to decrease risk of lymphedema. Now we know exercise is not only safe but also preventative.⁵

Where can I learn more about cancer-specific movement, aka exercise oncology?

Maple Tree Cancer Alliance (www.mapletreecanceralliance.org) employs certified exercise oncology instructors to serve patients at 86 program locations across the United States. It also offers virtual services for those who do not live near a Maple Tree program. [Memberships](#) include customized exercise plans, recipes, and healthy eating tips. The program [Maple Kids](#) is specifically designed for children with cancer. The Maple Tree site also offers some faith-based resources to support patients spiritually, if desired.

Exercise is now recommended for all cancer patients, including those with advanced disease and bone metastases, with proper assessment and monitoring. Consult a qualified exercise professional with oncology training.⁶

Cancer prevention

Regular exercise can reduce cancer risk by up to 24% for certain cancers, including colon (24% reduction), breast (10% reduction), and liver (17% reduction).⁷

Keep moving beyond cancer

Researchers have studied the benefits of physical activity after cancer treatment for approximately 40 years.⁸ A review of exercise effects for women treated for breast cancer found increased stamina, increases in natural “killer” cells that fight cancer, and improvements in mental and emotional health, from greater life satisfaction to improvements in depression and anxiety.⁹ For people who had other cancers, studies have shown improved muscle strength and improvements in mental and emotional health, including feeling better about their physical appearance.

Exercise can also reduce the risk of cancer recurrence. A landmark 2025 study showed that structured exercise reduced colon cancer recurrence by 28% and death by 37%.¹⁰

The American Cancer Society has issued specific guidelines for cancer survivors.²

Many hospitals and clinics offer exercise programs for people who have been through cancer treatment. You may also want to talk with your oncologist or a physical therapist about creating a personalized exercise program to address specific side effects, such as loss of bone strength from hormone therapy.

A sense of control

Physical activity can provide a greater sense of control for people dealing with the uncertainties of cancer. One study showed that simply doing arm exercises after breast cancer treatment benefited some women this way.¹¹

Tailoring a routine to help with specific side effects or choosing new or different activities to strengthen the body or relax the mind—can give you a sense that you are taking steps toward healing. Feeling stronger can also help you feel more capable as you go through treatment.

Cancer survivor Jenny Leyh has written extensively on integrative approaches to cancer, treatment, and survivorship. [Five Steps to a New Normal: Life After Cancer](#) includes a discussion of “work conditioning”: gaining back the physical strength, coordination, and stamina to return to work through exercise and other rehabilitation activities.

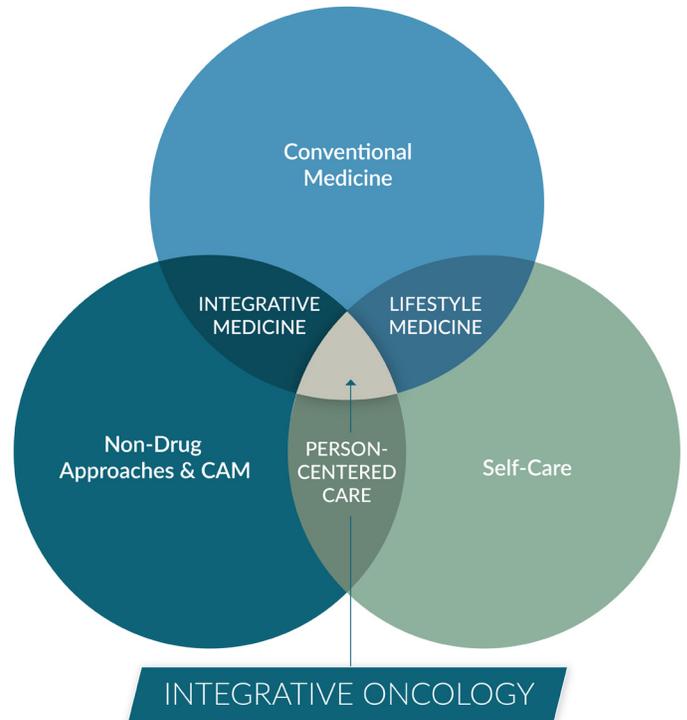
All about you

As with any movement, exercise, or nutrition program, it is important to learn what works for you. Keeping a written log of your progress can be motivating, whether it’s as simple as checking off days on a wall calendar or using an app to track health metrics and movement sessions. You can schedule movement sessions on your phone or download a fitness app for patients or survivors like Cancer Freedom or Medbridge Go. It’s important to discuss your plan with your health care team to ensure what you are doing is not only effective but also safe.

Learn more about [increasing your body’s ability to heal](#) with exercise.

Free resources

- [Physical Activity When You Have Cancer](#) from the American Cancer Society
- Cancer Council Australia offers a free booklet, [Exercise for People Living with Cancer](#)
- Video from Dr. Wayne Jonas offering an introduction to [tai chi](#)
- Video from Dr. Wayne Jonas on [The Three Best Exercises That You Can Do Right Now](#)
- [Nutritious Movement](#) website and resources
- [Maple Tree Cancer Alliance](#) website and resources
- [Smith Center for Healing and the Arts](#) for free virtual yoga classes



My Notes and Questions

References

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