Physical Activity and Cancer

Basic description

Research shows that being physically active helps reduce cancer risk. Regular physical activity helps maintain a healthy body weight by balancing caloric intake with energy expenditure, and may help to prevent certain cancers via both direct and indirect effects, including regulating sex hormones, insulin, and prostaglandins, and having various beneficial effects on the immune system.

The American Cancer Society recommends that adults engage in at least 150 minutes (2 hours and 30 minutes) of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes (1 hour and 15 minutes) of vigorous-intensity activity each week, or an equivalent combination, preferably spread throughout the week.

Because of increasing trends in overweight and obesity among youth and the impact that excess weight has on increasing cancer risk, the American Cancer Society recommends that children and teens get at least 1 hour of moderate- or vigorous-intensity activity each day, with vigorous-intensity activity occurring at least 3 days each week.

It's also important that people of all ages limit sedentary behavior, such as sitting, lying down, watching television, or other forms of screen-based entertainment. Doing some physical activity above usual activities, no matter what one's level of activity, can have many health benefits.

Cancers affected

Physical activity may directly reduce the risk of some cancers, including cancers of the breast, colon, and endometrium, as well as advanced prostate cancer, and possibly pancreatic cancer. Although evidence for many other cancers is limited, associations may exist.

Regular physical activity can also help to reduce overweight and obesity, which are associated with an increased risk of cancers of the colon and rectum, breast (in post-menopausal women), endometrium, kidney, pancreas, and esophagus. Evidence also suggests that obesity may increase the risk of cancers of the gallbladder, liver, ovary, and cervix, as well as multiple myeloma, non-Hodgkin lymphoma, and aggressive prostate cancer.

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There are other benefits as well.
Physical activity also reduces the risk of other major health problems, such as heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, and hypertension. Physical activity recommendations of the American Heart Association and the American Diabetes Association are consistent with those of the American Cancer Society.

Opportunities for risk reduction

There are many risks for cancer that a person can't control, such as aging or genetics. However, people can reduce their risk of cancer by getting to and staying at a healthy weight throughout life and by adopting a physically active lifestyle.

The American Cancer Society recognizes the importance of physical activity in reducing cancer risk and maintaining good health and recommends that every week healthy adults be moderately active for at least 150 minutes (2 hours and 30 minutes) or vigorously active for 75 minutes (1 hour and 15 minutes) or more. It's preferable to spread physical activity throughout the week. Children and adolescents should get at least an hour of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day, and at least 3 days a week it should be vigorous-intensity activity.

Consider the following:

- Balancing physical activity and energy intake is the best way to maintain a healthy body weight.
- Moderate-intensity activities are those that require effort equivalent to that of a brisk walk; leisurely bicycling, mowing the lawn, and yoga are examples.
- Vigorous-intensity activities generally engage large muscle groups and cause a noticeable increase in heart rate, breathing depth and frequency, and sweating. Some examples are jogging, swimming, aerobic dance, martial arts, skiing, and singles tennis.
- Previously sedentary individuals should begin physical activity slowly, working up to their desired goals over time. Engaging in activity levels below the recommended minimum can still be beneficial.
- Men age 40 and older, women age 50 and older, and adults with chronic diseases or risk factors for cardiovascular disease should consult a health care provider before starting a vigorous physical activity program.
- People with cancer should talk to their doctors about an activity program that is best for them and their situation.

Bottom line

Regular physical activity is important for overall good health. It not only reduces the risk of breast, colon and rectum, and some other cancers, but it also reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, hypertension, and diabetes.

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