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# Nutrition and Physical Activity After Cancer Treatment





The American Cancer Society uses the term cancer survivor to describe anyone who has ever been diagnosed with cancer from the time they were diagnosed, no matter where they are in the course of their disease.

Cancer survivors who have finished treatment may want to know if good nutrition and being physically active can help them live longer or feel better.

There is growing evidence that things like diet and physical activity can make a difference. Eating healthy foods and being active can help some cancer survivors live longer, lower their risk of the cancer returning (or of a new cancer developing), and limit some side effects of treatment. It can also help lower their risk of developing some other serious conditions like diabetes and heart disease, and improve their overall health and wellness.

After finishing cancer treatment, you might still have some symptoms or side effects that affect your nutrition and physical well-being. Most eating-related side effects of cancer treatments like nausea, vomiting, poor appetite, trouble chewing or swallowing, or feeling very tired go away after treatment ends. But some side effects can last for some time and may need to be treated.

If you are overweight or obese, there are things that may help you improve your health and lose weight. These include behavioral counseling, medications, or even surgery. Talk to your doctor or cancer care team about what option might be best for you. If



you haven't started a physical activity program yet, it is never too late. Regular physical activity will help you recover from treatment and will help improve your fitness. For most cancer survivors, it is safe to start an exercise program. If you have concerns about exercising, or need guidance, you can ask your cancer care team or a certified exercise professional for help.

## Nutrition during recovery

Cancer and cancer treatment can affect your body's needs for nutrients, as well as your eating habits and how your body digests, absorbs, and uses food. It's best to have nutrition goals that help you to:

- Make sure your body's nutrient and calorie needs are met
- Get to and stay at a healthy weight
- Avoid losing muscle (lean body mass)

**The American Cancer Society recommends that nutrition screening, assessment, and counseling begin as soon as possible after cancer is diagnosed.**

Nutrition screening and assessment mean looking for and learning more about any nutrition problems a person may have. Nutrition counseling is when a nutrition expert (like a Registered Dietitian [RD] or Registered Dietitian Nutritionist [RDN]) helps a person make healthy food choices. Nutrition counseling can help with nutrition problems that a person might have.



If you have nutrition-related problems after treatment, your team will likely do one of two things:

- They will have the RD or RDN on the cancer care team meet with you. An RD or RDN can help you manage treatment-related symptoms, improve your quality of life, and improve your eating.
- If there is no RD or RDN on your cancer care team, be sure to talk to your cancer care team about any questions and concerns you have about your nutrition. They can help you find a qualified professional for nutrition counseling.

Here are some tips about how to find a nutrition expert who is trained to work with people who have cancer:

- Ask your cancer care team for a referral to see an RD or RDN. It would be best if the RD or RDN is also a certified specialist in oncology (CSO).
- If an RD or RDN is not available on your cancer care team, ask about seeing a dietitian at your primary care provider's office, a clinic, or in your community.
- Visit the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics' website (**[www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)**) or call at **1-800-877-1600** to find a qualified RD or RDN or food and nutrition expert who is right for you.



## **Tips for eating well after cancer treatment**

- Check with your cancer care team to see if you have any food or diet restrictions.
- Ask your RD or RDN to help you create a nutritious, balanced eating plan.
- Try to eat a variety of colorful vegetables – dark green, red, and orange, fiber-rich legumes (beans and peas), and others.
- Include fruits, especially whole fruits with a variety of colors.
- Try to eat plenty of high-fiber foods, like whole-grain breads and cereals.
- Try to buy a different fruit, vegetable, food that is low in saturated fat, or a whole-grain product each time you shop for groceries.
- When choosing animal proteins, choose lean meats, poultry, and fish.
- Avoid or limit your intake of red (beef, pork, or lamb) and processed and smoked meats (bacon, hot dogs, deli meat).
- Try plant-based protein foods or meals made from dried beans, peas, nuts, and seeds.
- Avoid or limit sugar-sweetened beverages and refined-grain products.
- Choose low-fat milk and dairy products.



- It is best not to drink alcohol. But if you drink, limit it to no more than 1 drink per day for women, and 2 drinks for men. Alcohol is a known cancer-causing agent.
- If you want to lose excess weight:
  - » Consider cutting calories by reducing your portion size and not going back for seconds.
  - » Try baking or broiling foods, rather than frying.
  - » Increasing your activity can help you maintain a healthy weight. Choose activities that you enjoy. If you have any concerns, be sure to check with your cancer care team before starting an exercise program.

## **When you can't eat enough to meet your body's needs**

### **Tips to increase calories and protein**

If you are continuing to lose weight or having trouble getting enough calories or protein because of side effects from treatment, here are some tips that might help:

- Eat several small snacks throughout the day, rather than three large meals.
- Eat your favorite foods at any time of the day. For instance, eat breakfast foods for dinner if they appeal to you.
- Eat every few hours. Don't wait until you feel hungry.



- Eat your biggest meal when you feel hungriest. For example, if you are most hungry in the morning, make breakfast your biggest meal.
- Try to eat high-calorie, high-protein foods at each meal and snack.
- Exercise lightly or take a walk before meals to increase your appetite.
- Drink high-calorie, high-protein beverages like milk shakes and liquid supplements.
- Drink most of your fluids between meals instead of with meals. Drinking fluids with meals can make you feel too full.
- Try homemade or commercially prepared nutrition bars and puddings.

### **Vitamin and mineral supplements**

Cancer survivors should try to get the nutrients they need through food, not supplements.

There's no evidence at this time that taking supplements after cancer treatment reduces the risk of cancer coming back (recurrence). If you are thinking about taking a vitamin or mineral supplement after treatment, check with your cancer care team first. You'll want to know if there might be any harm to you or if the supplements will help you.



Some supplements can be useful if you have a specific deficiency, such as iron deficiency anemia. However, most studies have found that the risks of high-dose supplements usually outweigh the benefits. Unless your cancer care team recommends a supplement for a specific reason, do not take any that have amounts higher than 100% of the Daily Value (DV). It is best to get the nutrients you need from nutrient-rich foods and beverages.

## Physical activity during recovery

Physical activity has many benefits and is safe for most people who are living with cancer. However, if people have concerns about starting to exercise, or need help getting started, they can talk to their cancer care team or a certified exercise professional for advice on choosing a program that is safe and effective for them.

As a goal, the American Cancer Society recommends at least 30 minutes of activity on five or more days of the week, including strength training exercises, at least two days a week.

### **Ways regular exercise may improve your well-being:**

- Help your body and brain work better
- Reduce tired feeling (fatigue)
- Help lessen depression and anxiety
- Might help you sleep better
- Keep or improve your physical ability to get things done



- Improve your muscle strength, bone health, and range of motion
- Strengthen your immune system
- Increase your appetite
- Help you maintain a healthy weight
- May help with breast cancer-related lymphedema (and does not increase risk)
- Decrease the chance that some types of cancer will come back
- Improve your quality of life
- Reduce treatment side effects

## **Goals of an exercise program**

While there are many reasons for being physically active, each person's exercise program should be based on what's safe, effective, and enjoyable for them. Your exercise plan should take into account any program you already follow, what you can do now, and any physical problems or limits you have.

When recovering from cancer treatment, most people are able to slowly increase exercise time and intensity as their side effects lessen. What may be a low- or moderate-intensity activity for some people may seem like a high-intensity activity for some cancer survivors. Take your time and be patient with yourself as you gradually increase your activity. Remember – the most important thing is to move as much as you can.



Examples of low-intensity activities:

- Walking
- Yoga
- Zumba
- Riding a bicycle
- Swimming laps

Examples of moderate-intensity activities:

- Brisk walking
- Water aerobics
- Dancing (ballroom or social)
- Gardening
- Biking

## **Exercise safety precautions as you recover**

Most cancer survivors can safely start an exercise program, but if you have complications or restrictions due to your cancer or treatment, talk to a physical therapist or certified trainer if there is one on your cancer care team, or ask your team for a referral to one.

For help finding a certified trainer, contact the American College of Sports Medicine (**[www.acsm.org](http://www.acsm.org)**), the National Association of Sports Medicine (**[www.nasm.org](http://www.nasm.org)**), or the American Council on Exercise (**[www.acefitness.org](http://www.acefitness.org)**).



When starting to get active or becoming more active, here are some things to think about:

- Start slowly. Increase how often and how long you exercise slowly.
- Don't exercise if you feel dizzy or are unsteady on your feet.
- Your cancer care team will likely check your blood counts during follow-up visits. Ask them if your counts are OK for you to exercise.
- You may not be able to exercise if you have anemia (low red blood cell count). Discuss this with your doctor or nurse.
- If you have neutropenia (low white blood cell count) or if you take medicines that make you less able to fight infection, it's a good idea to stay away from public gyms and other public places until your counts are at safe levels.
- Drink plenty of fluids to keep yourself well hydrated. Ask your cancer care team what the right amount is for you.
- Avoid uneven surfaces or weight-bearing exercises that could cause you to fall and injure yourself.
- If you plan to exercise outside, find someplace safe and well-lit, and climate-controlled.
- Take someone with you or make sure someone knows where you are in case you need help. It can also help to carry your phone.



- To avoid injury, do not use heavy weights or do exercise that puts too much stress on your bones if you have osteoporosis, cancer that has spread to the bone, arthritis, nerve damage, poor vision, poor balance, or weakness.
- Watch for bleeding or bruising, especially if you are taking blood thinners.
- Avoid any activity that puts you at risk for falls or injury. If you notice numbness in your feet, problems with balance, swelling, pain, dizziness, or blurred vision, call your doctor right away.
- If you've had skin problems because of your treatment, it's best not to expose skin to heat in hot tubs and to chemicals like those used in chlorine pools.
- Do not exercise if you have pain, nausea/vomiting, or any other symptom that causes you concern. Call your doctor or nurse.
- If you still have a catheter (tube that goes into your body), port, or drain, avoid water and other exposures that may cause infections. Also, avoid resistance training that uses muscles in the area of the catheter to avoid dislodging it. Talk with your cancer team about what is safe for you.

## **Add physical activity to your daily routine.**

Here are some ways to add physical activity to the things you do every day. Remember, only do what you feel up to doing.

- Walk around your neighborhood, or take an extra lap down a store aisle when shopping.



- Ride your bike.
- Listening to music, get up and dance
- Mow the grass, or rake the leaves instead of using the blower.
- Tidy up your home or clean your bathroom.
- Wash and wax your car.
- Play active games with your children or grandchildren, like freeze tag, jump rope, and the games you loved to play when you were a child.
- Walk your dog (one that can be controlled so that you don't trip or get pulled off balance).
- Weed your garden.
- Use an exercise bike or treadmill, or do arm curls, squats, lunges, and sit-ups while watching TV.
- Park your car in the farthest parking space, and walk to the building.
- Use the stairs instead of the elevator or escalator.
- Get off the bus several stops early, and walk the rest of the way.
- Make appointments for yourself in your daily schedule for 10-minute walking breaks.
- Form a walking club of coworkers to help you stay motivated to walk during the workday.
- Wear a pedometer or smart watch every day, and increase your daily steps.



If you feel too tired to exercise, here are some things you can do to help:

- Set up a daily routine that allows activity when you are feeling your best. For example, some people have more energy in the morning, while others feel better later in the day.
- Balance activity with rest that does not interfere with nighttime sleep.
- Ask for help from family and friends when you need it.
- To save energy, keep things you use often within easy reach.

### **Tips to enhance your interest in your exercise program**

- Set short- and long-term goals.
- Focus on having fun.
- Do something different to keep it fresh. Try yoga, dancing, or tai chi.
- Ask for support from others, or get friends, family, and coworkers to exercise with you.
- Use charts to record your exercise progress.
- Recognize and reward your achievements.

Keep your exercise program simple and fun. The goal is to be as active as possible. Keep it safe, keep it fun, and make it work for you!



## To learn more

You can find the complete American Cancer Society Nutrition and Physical Activity Guidelines for Cancer Survivors online. Visit **[www.cancer.org/aftercancertreatment](http://www.cancer.org/aftercancertreatment)** or call us at **1-800-227-2345** to learn more about nutrition, physical activity, and living with cancer.







Finishing cancer treatment can be both stressful and exciting. Cancer survivors often want to know about food choices and physical activity after treatment. This information can help improve your quality of life as you recover after treatment.

For the latest cancer information, day-to-day help, and support, visit the American Cancer Society website at **[cancer.org/survivors](https://cancer.org/survivors)** or call us at **1-800-227-2345**.



[cancer.org](https://cancer.org) | 1.800.227.2345



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No. 941030-Rev. 6/25  
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