Physical Activity Cancer Fact Sheet

Research shows that being physically active helps reduce the risk of a variety of cancer types, as well as heart disease, diabetes, and many other diseases. Physical activity also indirectly reduces the risk of developing obesity-related cancers because of its role in helping to maintain a healthy weight. Being active is thought to reduce cancer risk largely by improving energy metabolism and reducing circulating concentrations of estrogen, insulin, and insulin-like growth factors.

The American Cancer Society recommends that adults engage in at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity each week, or an equivalent combination, preferably spread throughout the week.

Because of the high prevalence of 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 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 and other forms of screen-based entertainment. Doing any intentional physical activity above usual activities, no matter what one’s level of activity, can have many health benefits.

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

Abdominal fatness in particular is convincingly associated with colorectal cancer, and probably related to higher risk of pancreatic and endometrial cancers.

In addition, accumulating evidence suggests that obesity increases the risk for cancer recurrence and decreases survival rates for several cancers.

**Cancers affected**

Physical activity may reduce the risk of a variety of cancer types.
Opportunities for risk reduction

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

Consider the following:

- Balancing physical activity and energy intake is the best way to maintain a healthy body weight.
- 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 providers about an activity program that’s best for them and their situation.

The American Cancer Society’s nutrition and physical activity guidelines emphasize the importance of weight control, physical activity, healthy dietary patterns, and limited, if any, alcohol consumption in reducing cancer risk and helping people stay well. Unfortunately, the majority of Americans are not meeting these recommendations.


Bottom line

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