

# Exercise Is Our Friend ... Really!

by [Carol Michaels](#) •

Exercise may be the furthest thing from your mind after a cancer diagnosis. But even if you have never been active, exercise can become one of your favorite activities. Ask your doctor before you start to exercise as each person is unique and heals differently. With more medical professionals recommending exercise to their patients, it is imperative for cancer survivors to learn how to exercise safely.

A good exercise program will help to reduce the side effects of surgery and treatments. These side effects can include fatigue, neuropathy, decreased range of motion, weakness, lymphedema, and a significant emotional toll. Once you start to exercise and have less pain and stiffness, and more energy, you'll be motivated to continue. Cancer can be a wake-up call for you to make healthy lifestyle changes.

Exercise may also reduce the chance of recurrence. It's therefore more important than ever to add it to your recovery plan. For those who have been active prior to their diagnosis, this is great news. A good exercise program will help you to get back to the activities that you enjoy. For the cancer survivors who have been inactive, it is never too late to start. Work with an experienced cancer exercise specialist in your area or purchase cancer exercise books and DVD's. They'll give you the tools you need to get started and create a healthy lifestyle.

## Before You Begin

Speak to your health professional before beginning any exercise program. Your particular surgery, treatments, fitness level and healing speed will guide the progression of the exercises. Your health and recovery process are always changing, consequently it's important to regularly monitor your blood count,s muscle and joint pain, nausea, and fatigue. You may also have lingering impairments or health concerns that need to be evaluated by a physical therapist or lymphedema therapist.

Review the exact nature of your treatments with your oncologist so that you'll understand the their potential side effects. This way, you'll be better able to plan your exercise in relation to your unique situation.

For example, Arimedex may make your joints or muscles sore. Other medications affect balance, and cardiac function, or increase the risk of dehydration. It is crucial that you understand the health issues you may encounter as a consequence of your surgery or treatment. This will include learning which muscles are affected, which lymph nodes might have been removed, and the cardiac and pulmonary effects of radiation and chemotherapy.

## Exercise Goals

Goals should be specific and realistic. You may want to lose weight and increase your muscle mass. If flexibility is an issue, your goal may be to improve your range of motion. Other goals might include becoming stronger, having a better quality of life, better mood, or decreasing your chance of recurrence.

It is helpful to have both short term and long term exercise goals. They should be able to be adapted to changes in work, health, and family situations. If you are new to exercise, select an activity and set an achievable goal. Slowly add exercise to your daily activities and find what works with your lifestyle.

## Exercising During Chemotherapy and Radiation

It seems counterintuitive, but exercise during treatment is shown to be helpful.

Physical activity during treatment can reduce common side effects like fatigue, pain, nausea, depression or anxiety. If you are suffering from pain or nausea, have those issues under control before beginning. Your doctor will be able to tell you how often you should exercise and how intense your program should be.

Systemic treatments such as chemotherapy and hormonal therapy as well as targeted, biological and immunotherapies, may impact your balance, cardiac function, and gastro-intestinal tract. Furthermore, they may lead to neuropathy or numbness in your extremities.

Breast cancer patients are often on hormonal therapy. Common medications such as aromatase inhibitors (post-menopause) and Tamoxifen can lead to weight gain, joint pain, muscle pain, and other menopause-related symptoms including bone density loss. Other treatments for breast cancer, such as Herceptin, may have side effects that need to be reviewed with your doctor.

Radiation can cause fatigue and increases the risk of lymphedema. It can also cause swelling and burning of the skin.

## First Steps

Try to start moving as soon as possible after surgery, even if it is only walking indoors. This will help you to regain strength. Although only one limb may be affected by your surgery, try to move both limbs equally. If you had been inactive prior to surgery, start with short walks and increase the distance walked each time. You can also increase the frequency of the walks as you slowly increase the distance. Try to find a walking buddy and walk often. Build up strength slowly and make sure never to over do it. Just 15 minutes a day can improve your energy level and mood.

Be sure to incorporate aerobic activity into your fitness plan. Find the activity – one that increases your heart and breathing rate – that you enjoy and try to do it daily. Aerobics is an important component of a fitness plan and includes activities like walking, hiking, and dancing.

**Remember: Think positive and have fun!**



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