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Senior Health & Fitness with Mesothelioma



by [Kim Neuhauser](#)

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You probably know all about the many benefits of exercise. Experts note that a regular fitness routine can help you lose or maintain weight, sleep better, reduce depression, and prevent illness.

National Senior Health & Fitness Day is May 27th. So, it's a good time to consider the benefits of exercise for older people — especially those dealing with a cancer like mesothelioma.

Mesothelioma can cause fatigue, particularly when people are undergoing treatment in their later years. But spending more time resting is not always the best strategy, offers Carol Michaels, a New Jersey-based fitness trainer and author of the book, *Exercises for Cancer Survivors*. In fact, she notes, it could do more harm than good.

"It sounds counterintuitive, that when you're fatigued you should move more, but that's what cancer patients and survivors need," Michaels explains. "When you're facing cancer, you're at risk of becoming weaker. And with a disease like mesothelioma, that can cause complications that make recovery into a longer process."

That doesn't mean you need to start training for a 5K or hit the weight room at the gym. Starting slowly, building up strength and mobility gradually, and knowing when to challenge yourself can all be beneficial strategies during cancer treatment and recovery. Here are 4 tips that can help.

1. Focus on Breathing

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Seemingly simple but incredibly important, deep breathing should be part of any fitness regimen, according to Michaels. For some people, this breathing might even be the extent of their "workout" for the day.

Deep breathing exercises can be relaxing and meditative, especially for those with pleural mesothelioma (which tends to cause tightness in the chest). These exercises can help you focus during stretches and, better yet, reduce stress. "Cancer treatment can be incredibly anxiety-provoking," Michaels says. "There are so many different types of breathing exercises, too, that it's easy to find some that work best for you."

For example, some yoga-based breathing has students inhaling deeply and holding their breath for 5 seconds, then exhaling slowly. Another exercise might involve inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth while visualizing stress being "blown out" from the body.

People with limited lung capacity, including mesothelioma patients, might avoid deeper breathing and end up being less active. However, this can allow lung muscles to weaken, making the situation worse. Consider [belly breath, humming breath, and related exercises](#) to see what works best for you.

2. Get Aerobic

Once the muscles have relaxed due to focused breathing, you can move on to some aerobic activity. This might mean simply walking to the end of the hallway and back, Michaels explains.

Even if you need to limit your walking to short bursts throughout the day, it's crucial to incorporate some form of movement. "You should adjust your aerobic activity to your fatigue level," Michaels suggests. "But also keep in mind that, to some degree, you have to push through your fatigue to get more benefits."

She suggests setting goals that are attainable, but that also might require you to push yourself slightly. For example, if your movement today was going up and down a stairway, then tomorrow you might add a few hallways or a jaunt out to the mailbox and back. "You always want to think about doing just a little more each day," Michaels advises. "That's how you get stronger."

If you have more energy and fewer limitations, joining an exercise group can be a great way to connect with others and increase your aerobic goals. For cancer survivors and older people, the social relationships are vital. Combining these activities together with a walk around a lake or a yoga class can be very helpful.

3. Stretch It Out

"Many times, when a cancer patient has surgery or treatment, particularly if they're older, they tend to have a poor range of motion," Michaels says. Stretching can help address this problem, she adds, while also improving joint mobility and breaking down scar tissue.

You can do light stretches in a chair or even in bed. Depending on your strength and flexibility levels, you can use tools like weights and towels to gently loosen muscles. These types of exercises can also be a warmup for more aerobic activity.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends [several basic stretches](#) for seniors, including stretches that target the quadriceps, hamstrings, neck, arms, and upper back.

Stretches that focus on improving posture can be especially helpful for those with pleural mesothelioma, Michaels notes. After years — or even decades — of dealing with shortness of breath, a cancer survivor can hunch over in a protective response. However, this posture tends to weaken muscles, not just in the lungs, but throughout the chest and upper back area.

"When you stretch out the parts of the body associated with good posture, it stops you from rounding the shoulders and collapsing the chest," Michaels says. "In turn, this can help with diminished lung capacity, because you're strengthening that whole part yourself and giving your lungs more room to breathe."

4. Strike a Balance

A senior fitness routine should also include balance exercises. The National Institutes of Health [notes that balance problems](#) are among the most common reasons that older people seek help from a doctor. About 1/3 of adults over age 65 fall every year, which [can result in broken bones](#) that limit mobility and spark a subsequent fear of injury.

Possible causes of poor balance include medication side effects, weakened muscles, and inner ear issues. For older people with mesothelioma, the problem can be even more acute because of surgery or chemotherapy.

Cancer survivors can develop neuropathy, a condition that makes the hands and feet numb, Michaels says. When you can't feel your feet, balance becomes tricky — and that can increase the risk of falls and injuries. "Every older person, especially those with cancer, would benefit from putting more balance exercises into their routines," she says.

Besides helping to prevent falls, balance exercises can improve coordination, sharpen reaction time, and even strengthen bones and muscles. You don't need to do elaborate yoga poses to see these gains either. It's possible to enhance balance even with simple, everyday exercises such as lifting 1 foot while brushing your teeth or lifting 1 knee as high as possible while holding onto a chair.

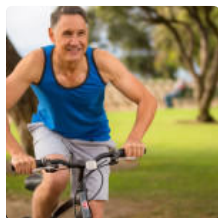
Major Benefits Are Possible

Incorporating exercises into a daily routine may take some effort at first. But by focusing on what's appropriate for your fitness and flexibility levels, taking this step can really speed up the recovery process.

"What I've noticed is that those who exercise before treatment, as well as set goals for themselves, have an easier time overall when dealing with a condition like mesothelioma," Michaels says.

Try not to take mesothelioma sitting down. No matter what your age or activity level, putting additional breathing, movement, stretching, and balancing into your days can boost mood, decrease stress, and increase overall mobility during treatment and recovery.

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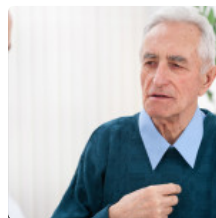
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