

## The Importance of Exercise



Carol Michaels, a Cancer Exercise Specialist and fitness consultant

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*Carol Michaels is a Cancer Exercise Specialist and fitness consultant with more than 18 years of experience. She has worked with physicians and other health professionals to develop a cancer recovery fitness program that is currently offered at her studio, hospitals, cancer support organizations, and community centers. Carol received her degree from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and is certified by The Cancer Exercise Training Institute, American Council on Exercise, and the American College of Sports Medicine.*

Exercise may be the furthest thing from your mind after a cancer diagnosis; however, exercise that focuses on functional fitness will help you carry out the activities of daily living

and return to the activities you enjoy. A well-designed program can also decrease side effects and improve quality of life.

Each person is unique and heals differently. Moreover, there are many types of cancers, treatments and late-term side effects, each one affecting survivors in different ways. It is important, therefore, to work with a cancer exercise specialist or possibly a physical therapist who can design the best program for your unique situation and fitness level. Check with your physician or other specialist tracking your survivorship care for recommendations of qualified exercise providers.

For people who were active before surgery, it is imperative to slowly work back up to the previous level of activity. It is not wise to go back to a gym and continue with a pre-cancer exercise routine. Cancer survivors need to have patience; returning to your pre-cancer fitness level takes time and cannot be rushed. It is important to understand the implications of your particular surgery and the corrective exercises needed to improve recovery.

Some cancer survivors will need to exercise under supervision while others will be able to exercise independently. The type and scope of cancer and your overall medical condition and fitness level will determine whether a supervised program is needed. Even if you don't need supervision, finding a program, either individual or small group, will help you to achieve your goals in a warm, friendly setting. The camaraderie and support of a small group can make taking care of your health enjoyable and fun.

Before beginning a cancer exercise program, you must receive medical clearance. But in general, an exercise routine should include aerobic exercise, strength training, stretching, and posture and balance exercises. It is important to note that many exercises and movements may not be recommended based on a person's fitness assessment, medical conditions, and particular surgery.

A good way to start an exercise program is through relaxation breathing, which can help reduce stress and anxiety. Inhale for five seconds and fill the torso up with air, then exhale from the lower abdomen for five seconds, pressing the navel in towards the spine. Imagine all of your tension and stress leaving your body with each exhalation.

Scapular retraction and shoulder rolls are a great way improve posture and prepare you for an exercise routine. Hold your arms at your sides, elbows bent to create a 90o angle. Firmly squeeze your shoulder blades together as you draw your shoulders and elbows back. Focus on squeezing your shoulder blades together as if trying to hold a walnut between them, then release to the starting position. For the shoulder roll, raise your shoulders up toward your ears, while inhaling slowly for five seconds. Slowly roll your shoulders backward and press them all the way back down, while exhaling slowly for five seconds. Increase the size of the circle with each roll.

As soon as you have medical clearance, you should start walking. Chemotherapy and radiation therapy can cause fatigue. It may seem counterintuitive, but physical activity can help boost your energy and improve your ability to tolerate treatments. You might be able to walk only a short distance at first. Every day, try to walk farther until you are able to walk for 30-45 minutes.

Once you start to exercise and have less pain, stiffness, and more energy, you will be motivated to continue. Cancer survivors who participate in exercise programs say that it is empowering and gives them a sense of control and accomplishment.