



---

# Exercise

## For people with cancer

---

### How exercise can help you

Exercise can help you feel better while you are getting treatment for cancer. It:

- Gives you more energy
- Lessens fatigue (tiredness)
- Makes you stronger
- Helps to keep your bones healthy
- Helps you sleep better
- Keeps your heart healthy
- Improves your mood
- Lessens your feelings of anxiety and depression
- Helps to manage your stress



### Tip:

10 minutes of light exercise each day can help you feel better.

### Starting an exercise routine

Talk to your health care team before starting a new exercise routine:

- It is never too late or too soon in your treatment to start exercising.
- **If you are not currently exercising:** Do some light exercise instead of sitting or lying down. Start with something small or something in your normal routine like walking at a mall or walking your dog.
- **If you are currently exercising:** You may need to do things differently because of fatigue or lack of energy. Increase the amount of exercise you are doing a little more every day until you are back to your normal routines.
- **If you have metastatic cancer in your bones:** Talk to your oncologist before starting to exercise.

### Tips to help you get started

- Choose exercise that you enjoy doing.
- Choose to do different types of exercise. Choose some that get your heart rate up and others that build your strength and flexibility. Include strength training 2 days each week.
- Even short exercise sessions of 5 minutes a few times a day are good for your body and help you reach your fitness goals.

---

“ There will be days when you don’t feel like exercising, but don’t give up! After a year of sticking with it, I’m now able to meet my weekly exercise goals. ”

- Patient and Family Advisor, Cancer Care Ontario

## Do exercise that feels right for you

- Choose to exercise on your own or in a group. Exercising with others may give you the support you need to keep doing it.
- Some hospitals and community organizations have group exercise programs for people with cancer.
- Choose exercise that is not too easy or too hard for you to do. You should be able to talk but not sing while doing the exercise.
- Exercise at your own pace. Think about your energy level and do activities that feel comfortable.

### Moderate exercise (medium)

Moderate aerobic exercise should feel like a challenge. It includes:

- Brisk walking
- Bike riding faster or with some hills
- Swimming
- Ball sports like volleyball, softball or tennis
- Yoga
- Ballroom dancing

## Types of exercise:

### Aerobic exercise is sometimes called cardio. It:

- gets your heart-rate up
- makes you breathe faster
- pumps blood and oxygen to your muscles and tissues

### Light exercise (easiest)

Light aerobic exercise should feel easy. It includes:

- Slow walking
- Slow bike riding
- Gentle swimming
- Light housework (dusting, light sweeping)
- Light gardening

### Intense exercise (hardest)

Intense exercise should feel like you are pushing yourself very hard. It includes:

- Running, jogging, race walking
- Biking fast
- Hiking
- Competitive sports like soccer or basketball
- Stair climbing

---

## Resistance or strength training improves your muscle strength:

- You can do strength training using
  - free weights, like dumb bells, barbells and household items like soup cans
  - resistance bands
  - weight machines
  - your own body weight
- Strength training is often done in repetitions (reps) and sets. A repetition is a single movement. A set is a group or series of repetitions.
- For example, when doing bicep curls, you may do 10 reps in 1 set, and repeat this 3 times with short breaks in between for a total of 30 bicep curls.

## To do light strength training (easiest):

- Use a small amount of weight (light dumbbell or kettle bell) or resistance (loose resistance band or tube).
  - If you are a beginner, start slowly. You should be able to comfortably do many repetitions.

## To do moderate strength training (medium):

- Add more reps into your set to make the exercise harder. When you are ready, add more sets.
- If you still want more of a challenge you can add more weight.

## To do intense strength training (hardest):

- This type of strength training is when you push yourself as hard as you can.
- This type of training should be done with a qualified exercise professional to make sure that you are doing the activity safely.

## Exercising safely

Exercising before, during, and after cancer treatment is safe for most people. Ask your healthcare team if you need to change your exercise routine to make it safe.

- If you have metastatic cancer in your bones, talk to your health care team before starting an exercise program.
- Warm-up for a few minutes before you exercise to get your muscles moving. Good warm-up activities are marching on the spot, stretching, walking and gentle arm circles.
- Cool-down after you exercise with light exercises, (like those from your warm up) and stretching.
- Respect your pain and fatigue levels and only do what feels good and safe.
- After surgery, most people can return to their regular exercise routines in about 4-8 weeks.
- Ask your surgeon about exercises to help your body recover (rehabilitation) and when it is safe to go back to your pre-surgery exercise routines.

## Stop exercising if you feel:

- Dizzy
- Short of breath
- Chest pain
- New pain or more pain than usual
- New or more swelling in your arm(s) or leg(s)
- Increased fatigue and/or decreased energy
- More sweaty than normal, for no reason

If you have any changes in your body after exercising that are not normal for you, tell your healthcare team at your next visit.

---

## If you need help with exercise, talk to:

- A physiotherapist, occupational therapist or a qualified exercise professional who is trained to work with people with cancer
- Your family doctor
- Your cancer healthcare team

## What is a qualified exercise professional?

Exercise professionals in Ontario can have different names depending on their training.

Registered Kinesiologists and Certified Exercise Physiologists (CEP) have university education about how the body works.

It is important that your exercise professional has training or certifications for working with people with cancer.

## Ask your exercise professional some questions about their experience in helping people with cancer:

- What type of training or certifications do you have?
- Do you have specific training for working with people with cancer?
- Do you know of any exercise programs for people with cancer in our community?
- Can you recommend a routine for me that is safe?

If you have questions or concerns about exercise, speak to your healthcare team.



### Tip:

Ask your health care team,  
“Is there any person, group or class that can help me reach my exercise goals?”

### Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the Patient and Family Advisors and the Clinical Advisory Group who worked on this guide.

This patient guide was created by Cancer Care Ontario to provide patients with information about exercise when you have cancer. It should be used for information only and does not replace medical advice. This guide does not include all information about exercise when you have cancer. Always ask your health care team if you have questions or concerns. The information in this guide does not create a physician-patient relationship between Cancer Care Ontario and you.

### Need this information in an accessible format?

1-855-460-2647, TTY 416-217-1815, [publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca](mailto:publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca) CPQ2687