

BREAST CANCER PHYSICAL ACTIVITY



Physical activity has many benefits for people with breast cancer, from reducing fatigue to helping you regain a sense of control. While everyone is recommended to do a certain amount of activity each week, some treatments for breast cancer can make one feel very tired or ill. If this is the case, it is best not to worry about trying to do the recommended amount. Even a small amount of activity will have benefits.

Why be physically active?

Regular physical activity can help maintain or improve your health during and after treatment, and can:

- help avoid or reduce some side effects of cancer treatment – such as fatigue, weight gain, osteoporosis and lymphoedema
- improve long-term health, reducing the risk of heart attacks and strokes, and may reduce the risk of the cancer coming back
- help mental wellbeing by reducing anxiety, stress, depression and improving your overall mood
- prevent or reduce the loss of muscle tone and aerobic fitness that can happen during treatment.

As well as being active, it's also important to eat a healthy diet.

How much physical activity should I do?

It's recommended that adults should do at least 150 minutes (2 hours 30 minutes) of moderate-intensity activity a week. Moderate-intensity activity should make your heart beat faster. You'll feel warmer and breathe slightly harder, but you should still be able to hold a conversation.

You can split this however you like. For example, you could do 30 minutes of activity on five days a week. If you want to do shorter periods of activity, you could do 10 minutes three times a day on each of these days. Any amount of activity is better than none; if you struggle to do 150 minutes, start by trying to reduce the time you spend sitting down or being inactive and gradually increase this over time. If you have a medical condition that means you can't do much physical activity, try to be as active as your condition allows. Even a small increase in exercise is associated with health benefits. If you've had breast reconstruction, check with your specialist team when you can start exercising and what type of activity would be appropriate for you.

What type of activity should I do?

Examples of moderate intensity activities are:

- brisk walking
- cycling
- hiking or hill walking
- water aerobics or swimming
- gardening or housework

A combination of different types of activity can be more interesting, and will exercise different parts of your body.

Tips if you're new to exercise

If you're new to exercise, you should build up your activity levels gradually. There are many ways to include physical activity in your daily routine. The following tips may help.

If you enjoy walking, try to increase the amount of time you walk for and the number

of times you walk each day. You could also try increasing your pace as your energy

returns. A pedometer (or a pedometer app for your phone) can help you monitor your progress.

- Energetic housework can help increase your daily activity levels.
- If you drive to work or the shops, park your car a little further away and walk the rest.
- Get off the bus a stop earlier than you need to and walk.
- Use the stairs instead of taking the lift.
- Try to sit less and stand more, for example when talking on the phone.

Setting realistic goals and keeping a record of how much activity you do may help you stay motivated.

Muscle-strengthening activities

As well as activities like walking, aim to do muscle-strengthening activities at least twice a week. Ask someone in your treatment team for advice on when you can begin doing muscle-strengthening activities.

These activities can help strengthen your muscles after treatment, and include:

- sitting to standing
- squats
- press-ups against the wall
- lifting light weights, such as tins of food or small bottles of water
- gardening
- activities that involve stepping and jumping such as dancing
- using fitness equipment such as a static bike or cross trainer

- yoga

Physical activity during and after treatment

Exercising during and after treatment for breast cancer can be difficult. If you have side effects such as fatigue or you feel sick, don't worry about trying to do too much. Even doing a small amount of activity has benefits.

Before starting any type of activity, it is important to talk to the specialist team. It's best to build up activity gradually, particularly if exercise is new to you.

Physical activity and surgery

After surgery for breast cancer, shoulder and arm exercises can help you regain the movement and function you had before surgery. You can view specific information about exercises after breast surgery, which is enclosed in this web app

It is important not to lift anything heavy for a few weeks after surgery

What type of physical activity to do and how much is a personal decision and it will depend on your fitness level before your surgery. Many people feel well enough to go for a short walk just a few days after surgery, but others may need longer to rest.

Physical activity during chemotherapy

Side effects from chemotherapy vary from person to person. You may feel extremely tired during your treatment, and there may also be periods when you feel sick. This can be frustrating if you want to be physically active, but there will be times when you do feel able to do some type of activity. Gentle exercise, such as walking, can boost your energy and help make you feel less tired.

Your specialist team can advise you about which activities are suitable while you're having chemotherapy treatment.

Swimming and chemotherapy

You may be advised to avoid swimming while having chemotherapy. If you do want to go swimming, discuss it with your hospital team first. This is because chemotherapy affects your immune system's ability to fight infection, which might make you more susceptible to any germs in the water.

Physical activity during radiotherapy

If you're having radiotherapy, any gentle exercise that feels comfortable, such as walking, gentle stretching, yoga, is suitable.

Due to the possible skin reactions that radiotherapy can cause, you may be advised to avoid swimming during the treatment as chemicals in the water could react with your skin.

If you do have a skin reaction after radiotherapy, it's best to wait until it has settled down before you start swimming again.

Physical activity while taking hormone (endocrine) therapy

Hormonal treatments (for example anastrozole, letrozole, exemestane and tamoxifen) either reduce the amount of oestrogen in the body or block the effect of oestrogen on cells. This may increase the risk of developing osteoporosis.

You can help keep your bones strong and reduce the risk of osteoporosis by doing some:

- weight-bearing exercises, such as walking, dancing and stair climbing
- resistance training (working against the weight of another object), such as press-ups against the wall or lifting light weights.

Hormone therapies may cause pain and joint stiffness. This can often be helped by exercise and taking pain relief.

One of the side effects of hormone therapy can be hot flushes and regular, gentle exercise like walking or swimming may help reduce these.

Physical activity after treatment

After treatment you will usually be able to return to whatever physical activity you did before your diagnosis. The time it takes to get back to your previous level of activity may vary, so be realistic and gradually build up to it. If you want to try something different, or are worried about restarting your usual routine, talk to your specialist team.

Physical activity if you have osteoporosis

If you've been diagnosed with osteoporosis, avoid high-impact exercises such as jumping, running, jogging or skipping.

A special exercise programme may be recommended if you're at high risk of fracture. Ask your specialist team for advice.

Physical activity and lymphoedema

Lymphoedema is a swelling caused by a build-up of lymph fluid in the surface tissues of the body, and can occur as a result of damage to the lymphatic system caused by either surgery or radiotherapy. The most common symptom is swelling in the arm, which can include the hand and fingers, but the breast or chest area can also be affected. It's thought that exercise doesn't cause or worsen lymphoedema and may even lessen symptoms.

The type of exercise that's best for you depends on the severity and cause of your lymphoedema, and whether you have any other medical conditions, such as heart disease or arthritis. Your doctor will talk about what might suit you according to the extent of your lymphoedema.

When choosing your exercise, focus on aerobic exercises and those that help increase muscle strength?

There is ongoing research into types of exercise for people with lymphoedema. However, yoga and swimming can be of benefit.

If you have been fitted with a compression garment you should wear it while exercising as it can help increase lymph and blood flow. You don't need to wear the compression garment when swimming, because water will naturally put pressure on your arm. However,

put the sleeve back on as soon as possible after. If you notice swelling in your arm during or after swimming, speak to your doctor about whether you should wear a compression garment while swimming.