

# Exercise and upper GI cancer

Exercise is an important part of living well after a cancer diagnosis, it can support both your physical and mental health.

While exercising during active treatment can be challenging for a variety of reasons, the Clinical Oncology Society of Australia recommends that people who have cancer should be as physically active as their condition and circumstances allow.

## Benefits of exercise

It's well-known that appropriate levels of exercise are good for health and wellbeing. When it comes to cancer patients, exercise has several other benefits:

- It's the most effective treatment for cancer-related fatigue, studies show those who exercise regularly experience 40% to 50% less fatigue during treatment.
- Regular exercise increases muscle strength, improves joint flexibility and overall ability to do daily activities which may be impaired after surgery and other therapies.
- Physical activity helps control weight and maintain muscle which is a critical factor during cancer treatment.
- Regular exercise leads to improved mental wellbeing and a greater quality of life overall.
- Emerging evidence suggests that regular exercise before, during and/or following cancer treatment reduces the severity of side effects and provides a protective effect against cancer recurrence.

## How much exercise do you need?

It's recommended that all people with cancer should aim for (or build up to) and then maintain:

- 20-30 minutes of moderate daily exercise or 75 minutes of vigorous activity each week
- 2-3 sessions of weight training or muscle-strengthening exercise a week

You should work with your treating team to ensure exercise doesn't compromise your treatment or recovery.

## What exercise should you do

The ideal exercise program should cover all components of fitness including:

- cardiovascular (get your heart rate up and breathing a bit heavier)
- strength (e.g. lifting weights, using resistance bands or exercises using your body weight, such as pushups)
- balance and flexibility

Choosing activities that you enjoy will make it easier for you to be consistent. Walking, jogging, swimming and cycling are all great choices. Gentle forms of exercise such as Tai Chi, Qi Gong, Yoga or even gentle stretching can also be incorporated into your daily life.

Remember, the exercise you choose should be compatible with your body and your treatment program. Before starting an exercise program, you should speak to your doctor or cancer care team about what exercise

is appropriate for you and whether there are any particular activities or movements you should avoid.

## Safety precautions for exercising

While exercise has proven benefits, it's important to take certain precautions to ensure that your exercise program doesn't compromise your health and safety. Things to consider include:

- If you have contracted COVID-19, check with your doctor if it's safe to exercise, once you're past your infectious period.
- Check that your blood levels are within a safe range. Low blood cells may cause fatigue and low white blood cells may affect your ability to fight infection, so exercising in public venues may not be appropriate.
- If you are having radiation therapy, avoid exposing skin in and around the treatment area to chlorine in swimming pools.
- If you are taking blood thinners you may experience issues with bleeding and should avoid situations that risk falls or other injuries.
- If you have a catheter or feeding tubes you need to avoid bodies of water that could cause severe infection. You should also take care that your physical activity won't dislodge your tube.
- Build your exercise up gradually, especially if you have lost muscle strength and aerobic fitness.
- Allow adequate time to heal after surgery.

## When should you stop exercising?

If you experience any unusual or concerning symptoms you should stop exercising and consult your doctor. Things to be aware of include:

- swollen ankles, neck, face or arms – seek urgent medical help
- feeling dizzy or fainting while exercising
- shortness of breath with only mild exertion
- chest pain or palpitations
- sudden onset of nausea during exercise
- chills or shaking during exercise
- severe vomiting or diarrhoea
- high temperature or unusual pain

Of course, there will be some days when you don't feel up to exercising. That's okay. Try to do something that involves moving your body; light gardening, a short walk or gentle stretching. Doing something is better than doing nothing. Remember to listen to your body and be kind to yourself.

## Where to get help

For more information about staying active contact our Wellbeing Team on **1300 881 698** or **support@pancare.org.au**.

To find an accredited exercise physiologist who is experienced in cancer care, visit **essa.org.au/find-aep**, remember to select 'Cancer' in 'Special Interest Area'.