

Exercise and Cancer Recovery

Invite Health In: Understanding the Role of Exercise Oncology

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A cancer diagnosis can be frightening. It changes life quickly and raises many questions about health, strength, and the future. While medical treatments such as surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation remain essential, research now shows that another powerful tool can support recovery and quality of life: physical activity.

Today an entire scientific discipline called Exercise Oncology studies how physical activity can help individuals diagnosed with cancer maintain strength, manage treatment side effects, and improve overall wellbeing during and after treatment.

Why Exercise Matters

For many years, cancer patients were encouraged to rest and avoid activity. While rest is important during treatment, **research now shows that appropriate safely selected movement can provide significant benefits.**

Research consistently shows that physical activity can help:

- Improve physical fitness and maintain muscle strength
- Reduce fatigue associated with cancer treatments
- Improve mood and emotional wellbeing
- Support daily functioning and independence
- Enhance overall quality of life
- Exercise may reduce recurrence risk

These findings are a major reason researchers around the world — including teams at Yale University School of Public Health — are studying exercise as part of cancer prevention, treatment, and survivorship.

The Role of Prehabilitation (Prehab)

Increasingly, medical teams are recognizing the value of 'prehabilitation'—or 'prehab'—before surgery or treatment begins. **Prehab focuses on strengthening the body in advance so that patients are better prepared physically and mentally for treatment.**

Even modest improvements in strength, mobility, and cardiovascular fitness before treatment can help patients recover more quickly afterward. Prehab may include gentle strength training, walking programs, breathing exercises, and mobility work tailored to the individual's health status.

Safe Ways to Start Moving

For many people living with cancer, the safest approach is to begin slowly and build gradually. Consider starting with simple activities such as:

- Short daily walks, even 5–10 minutes at a time
- Gentle strength exercises using body weight or light resistance
- Stretching or mobility work to maintain joint movement

Because cancer treatment can weaken the immune system, crowded gyms and shared equipment may increase exposure to germs. **Safe movement at home or in controlled environments is often a better option during treatment and early recovery.**

* Always speak with your physician or care team before beginning any new exercise program, especially during active treatment.

Exercise Must Be Individualized

Not every exercise program is appropriate during cancer treatment. Factors such as treatment side effects, surgical recovery, fatigue levels, and overall health must all be considered.

This is why specialized professionals such as Physical Therapists and Certified Cancer Exercise Trainers (CET) can help design safe, appropriate programs tailored to each individual's needs.

About Linda Gottlieb

Linda T. Gottlieb, MA, CPT, CET is one of the first Certified Cancer Exercise Trainers in the US and has more than four decades of experience helping adults build strength, mobility, and confidence through sustainable exercise.

Linda has worked with the Yale University School of Public Health research team supporting national clinical trials studying how physical activity affects cancer survivorship and quality of life.

Through FitTraining, she provides personalized coaching designed to help individuals improve strength, independence, and overall wellbeing.

A Final Thought

Cancer may change your life, but movement can help you reclaim it. Exercise can play a meaningful role in helping you return to your normal life—or perhaps an even stronger one.

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