

EXERCISE AND HEAD AND NECK CANCER



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This information aims to help you understand how the treatment of head and neck cancer may affect exercise. It may help answer some of your questions and help you think of other questions that you may want to ask your cancer care team; it is not intended to replace advice or discussion between you and your [cancer care team](#).

THE IMPORTANCE OF STAYING PHYSICALLY ACTIVE DURING HEAD AND NECK CANCER

- Cancer treatment may cause a range of side effects; exercise has been shown to help people cope with many of these. These include fatigue, feeling sick (nausea), loss of appetite, weight changes, anaemia, loss of muscle mass, depression and anxiety.
- Regular exercise during and after treatment for head and neck cancer is safe and can help you feel better and recover more quickly.
- Exercise benefits may include feeling stronger, more energetic, less anxious or worried, as well as having increased self-esteem, improved circulation and better sleep.

HOW TO BE MORE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE

- Physical activity is any activity that gets the body moving and heart rate up. This not only includes structured exercise sessions, but also everyday activities such as housework and gardening.
- Including an exercise routine into daily life doesn't need to be difficult, costly or inconvenient. Try to make it something to enjoy and look forward to – this means that the exercise program that is right for you and will depend on what you like doing, your current fitness levels, and what your cancer care team says is safe for you.
- Most adults who have had a diagnosis of cancer should aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most, if not all, days of the week. This goal may change based on exercise history, side effects and symptoms and fitness level.

DURING TREATMENT

- During treatment, keep your cancer care team informed on your activity levels. They may give you advice on what is safe to do. You may not feel like exercising all the time and it may be harder on some days than others; even a few minutes of light exercise may be better than no exercise at all.
 - o You may actually want to work out two different exercise plans – one for your good days, and another for those days when you are experiencing strong side effects or symptoms.
 - o Keeping a diary of your activity levels, symptoms and side effects during treatment to track your progress and make changes when they are needed.

AFTER TREATMENT

- Physical activity is important to your overall health and quality of life after cancer treatment.
- The [late effects of cancer treatment](#), such as feeling tired, can sometimes make it difficult to stay active after treatment. However, most people are able to slowly increase their exercise levels over time.
- **Surgery and Radiation therapy treatments** for head and neck cancer can often lead to the areas around the neck and shoulders feeling ‘tight’ and/or stiff.
 - o For those who have had either of these treatments, keep a regular routine of stretching exercises to maintain flexibility and mobility
 - o For those who have muscle weakness due to surgery, such as a [neck dissection](#), special exercises may be needed to strengthen the shoulder muscles and prevent injuries

SUGGESTIONS TO HELP MAKE EXERCISE A PART OF DAILY ROUTINE

- Inform the cancer care team before you intend to begin exercise
- Start slowly and build up fitness levels over time.

- Start with shorter periods of exercise and taking regular breaks.
For example, 5–10 minutes of walking that build up to 30 minutes.
- Always warm up before beginning any exercise. For example, some light activity and/or gentle stretching for a couple of minutes.
- Use resistance bands, your body weight or hand weights to strengthen muscles and bones. Try to do exercises that use large muscle groups, such as your thighs, stomach, chest and back. Specific strengthening exercises may be needed after head and neck surgery, such as a neck dissection.
- To stay motivated, ask a friend or family member to join you, or join a group program.
- Most importantly, keep exercise fun!

HELP WITH BEING PHYSICALLY ACTIVE

- When you are ready to begin exercising, it is a good idea to see an exercise professional, such as an exercise physiologist or physiotherapist.
 - An **exercise physiologist** is an expert in using exercise as medicine to help with managing injuries and chronic diseases such as cancer. They can help develop an exercise program, together with the cancer care team that is tailored for your specific needs.
 - A **physiotherapist** is an expert in preventing and treating injuries using a variety of treatment methods, including exercise, massage and joint manipulation. They can also advise people affected by cancer.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR DOCTOR

- Can I exercise while I'm having treatment?
- Are there any types of exercise I should avoid while having treatment?
- Are there any types of exercise I should avoid after treatment?
- I haven't exercised much before. Do I need to have any general health checks first?
- Do you think I would benefit from referral to an exercise physiologist or physiotherapist?

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

- The Cancer Council provides an information and support line to Australians affected by cancer. Call 13 11 20 to speak with a specialist cancer professional about anything to do with cancer, including exercise.
 - Find out more about exercise from the Cancer Council's [Exercise for people living with cancer](#) booklet.
 - The Cancer Council NSW runs a free healthy lifestyle program called ENRICH. Find more information about the program [here](#) or contact the helpline on 1300 360 541 to register. The program is a good way to start or get back into exercise after cancer treatment.
- Find a local Accredited Exercise Physiologist with Exercise and Sports Science Australia (ESSA) on <https://www.essa.org.au/find-aep/>

You may want to write additional questions here to ask your doctor or cancer care team

About Head and Neck Cancer Australia

Head and Neck Cancer Australia (formerly Beyond Five) is Australia's only charity dedicated to providing information and support to people living with head and neck cancer, caregivers, family and healthcare professionals.

Head and Neck Cancer Australia's mission is to improve the quality of life of everyone affected by head and neck cancer through education and access to support and to raise awareness of head and neck cancer nationally.

Head and Neck Cancer Australia supports people through their cancer journey, from diagnosis to treatment and life after cancer by providing comprehensive, easy to understand and easy to access information. We have the only Directory of Head and Neck Cancer services and support groups available in Australia and New Zealand helping people to find the right services and support when they need it most.

Phone: 1300 424 848

Email: contact@headandneckcancer.org.au

Web: www.headandneckcancer.org.au

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First Published: 2016

Last updated: November 2020