

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 (not enough red blood cells or haemoglobin to carry oxygen around the body), loss of muscle mass, depression, and anxiety.
- Regular exercise before commencing, during and after treatment for head and neck cancer is safe and can help you feel better and recover more quickly.
- The benefits of regular exercise may include feeling fitter, stronger, more energetic and less fatigued, less anxious or worried, as well as having increased self-esteem 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 a regular exercise routine in your daily life doesn't need to be difficult, costly, or inconvenient. Try to see exercise as an opportunity, and 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 and activity 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 could be as simple as going on a brisk walk, where you can talk in short sentences but you don't have enough puff to sing or whistle. 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. Sometimes you may not feel like exercising 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.

- You may actually want to consider creating two different exercise plans – one for your good days, and another for those days when you are experiencing strong side effects or symptoms like fatigue. For instance, if you feel exhausted after your treatment, plan to go light at these times, knowing that on better days, you can plan to do moderate to intensive exercise.
- Try to keep a diary of your activity levels, symptoms, and side effects during treatment to track your progress and make changes when they are needed. This is also a great resource for your cancer care team to adjust your program if needed.

AFTER TREATMENT

- Being physically active is important to your overall health and quality of life once your cancer treatment has finished.
- 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 the amount of exercise they're doing 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.
- For those who have had either of these treatments, it's important to keep a regular routine of stretching exercises to maintain flexibility and mobility around this area.
- For those who have muscle weakness due to surgery, such as a [neck dissection](#), special exercises may be needed to strengthen the shoulder and neck muscles to keep you doing what you enjoy and avoid any ongoing issues.

WHAT SHOULD I BE AIMING TO ACHIEVE?

- All people with cancer should aim to avoid being inactive and return to daily activities as soon as they are able to after diagnosis, and to remain as active as their health and abilities permit.
- You should aim to build up to, and then maintain:
 - at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity, or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic exercise per week (see table), and
 - two to three resistance exercise sessions per week, performed on non-consecutive days, that work major muscle groups (see table).

ACTIVITY	HOW HARD SHOULD IT FEEL?
Aerobic exercises are activities that raise your heart rate and breathing such as walking, jogging or cycling.	<p>Moderate intensity: you are breathing harder than at rest but can still speak comfortably.</p> <p>Vigorous intensity: you are breathing hard, making it challenging to hold a conversation uninterrupted.</p>
Resistance exercises are activities that work your muscles against a resistance, such as lifting weights, using resistance bands, or using your own body weight	<p>Aim to perform 6-12 repetitions per set. Start with least 1-2 sets per exercise and gradually build up to 2-4 sets as you get stronger.</p> <p>You should pick a weight or resistance that is challenging. By the end of each set your muscles should feel fatigued, like you could only manage another 1-3 repetitions before you could not do another.</p>

- It is important that all exercises (including sets and repetitions) should be individualised and adapted to your abilities and needs, any cancer-specific factors (e.g., what cancer treatment you are currently receiving, or if you have had any side-effects of your treatment), as well as your overall health status. Depending on your individual situation, other types of exercise (e.g., balance) may also be recommended. An exercise professional and your treating team can help identify what is right for you.

SUGGESTIONS TO HELP MAKE EXERCISE A PART OF DAILY ROUTINE

- Inform the cancer care team before you intend to begin exercise, this is important particularly if you haven't done much physical activity recently
- While being physically active has many benefits, your team may be able to provide support or recommendations
- Start slowly and build up fitness levels over time.
- Always warm up before beginning any exercise. For example, some light activity and/or gentle stretching for a couple of minutes.

- Start with shorter periods of exercise and take regular breaks. For example, 5–10 minutes of walking that builds up to 30 minutes. If safe, aim to spend some of this by walking outside. If the weather is poor, put the radio on walk up and down your corridor for a few songs.
- 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. A couple of examples of exercises are sit-to-stands/squats and wall push-ups. 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. They can set you up with a program that is tailored to you, your level of fitness, and your treatment situation.
- An **exercise physiologist** is an expert in prescribing exercise as medicine to support people with managing injuries, chronic and complex conditions, including cancer. They can develop an exercise program, together with the cancer care team, that is tailored for your specific needs to help manage treatment side-effects and improve overall health and wellbeing.
- A **physiotherapist** is an expert in helping you recover from injury/surgery/treatment, improve pain, mobility, and prevent further issues. They can do this through general fitness exercise prescription, specialised exercise for targeted areas of concern, and often offer hands on treatment to improve mobility, often of the jaw, neck and shoulder in this group.

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 (i.e. any restrictions with any attachments like PICC lines)?
- 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?
- Is there a service you typically refer to or some resources that you could guide me to?

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 offers services, information, webinars, and other resources to help you find your 'new normal' [here](#) . to help assist you to 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/>.
- Cancer Exercise Toolkit - <https://cancerexercisetoolkit.trekeeducation.org/>.
- Prep 4 Cancer Surgery - <https://prep4cancersurgery.org.au/> (prehab specific).
- ACSM Exercise is Medicine - <https://www.exerciseismedicine.org/eim-in-action/moving-through-cancer-2/>.
- Contact clinics directly and ask whether their therapists have experience treating individuals with cancer, as not all exercise physiologists (EPs) and physiotherapists (PTs) have specialised training in this area.
- Find a local Physiotherapist with the Australian Physiotherapy Association on <https://choose.physio/find-a-physio> or simply google (not sure you can suggest this? Just not all Physiotherapists are APA members)

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 is the only national charity dedicated to providing free, trusted and easy to understand information, education and support to people affected by Head and Neck Cancer.

We represent over 5,300 people who are newly diagnosed each year and more than 17,000 people who are living with Head and Neck Cancer across Australia.

We also lead the national effort to advocate for government support to encourage prevention, increase early diagnosis and improve the quality of life of people living with Head and Neck Cancer in Australia.

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