Staying Physically Fit

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If you were involved in an exercise program before you became ill, you will probably be open to the idea of getting involved in an active program all through your recovery. But if you have never been involved in an organized exercise routine, you may need some encouragement. Welcome this encouragement if you get it. If you don’t get it, seek it out, because getting and staying physically fit should be one of your most important goals.

Why You Should Exercise

Physical fitness is healthy for everyone, of course. But it is essential for all cancer patients. Even though it’s hard to find the energy to exercise when you are sick, the benefits of keeping your body in an active state are too great to ignore. When you participate in a daily exercise program you will reap the following rewards:

1. You will improve your prognosis.

If you are in good physical condition, you may tolerate therapy better. This, in turn, may allow you to have more aggressive treatments and so stand a better chance of remission or cure. It is well known that successful treatment and an improved prognosis depend directly on physical status. The simple truth is that if you are physically fit, you may live longer and enjoy a more active life.

2. You will stop your muscles from wasting away.

When we are healthy, we all usually exercise our muscles one way or another—by walking up and down stairs, doing housework, going shopping, taking part in athletic activities like golf and tennis, or simply by walking as we go about our business. Even a low level of activity helps to maintain muscle tone and strength. But during an acute or chronic illness, prolonged bed rest is often necessary. Muscles shrink in size and strength when they’re not used for a long time. An exercise program will make sure that that doesn’t happen to you.

3. You will recover faster.

If you do not exercise after surgery or while you’re undergoing radiotherapy or chemotherapy, your muscles will get weaker and weaker. The tissues that may be broken down by therapy will not be repaired as quickly as they should be. By exercising, you can help your tissues rebound and you can minimize any deterioration in your joints. You might also help prevent complications such as bone softening, blood clots, and bedsores. And, not least, you’ll get some relief from the boredom and depression that often come with being confined to bed.
When to Start

Become physically active as soon as possible after treatment. It is now the general practice within one day of surgery to get out of bed and at least sit in a chair. Even this minimal activity helps reduce the loss of muscle mass and increase strength.

True, pain can limit physical exercise after a mastectomy, bowel surgery, or some other major operation. And you may be depressed by a change in your body image and not feel like doing anything. You may need help to get going. But with appropriate timing, you should turn your attention to rehabilitation.

In the Hospital At least a gentle exercise program should begin while you are still in the hospital. This may involve simple muscle tightening while you lie in bed or passive muscle exercises administered by a physical therapist or taught to your family. As your strength returns, different forms of physical activity—isometric and isotonic exercises and rhythmic repeated movements for various muscles—will help get you on the path to improved fitness. Massage therapy can complement these activities, helping you relax your mind and body and improving your circulation.

You might think all this will involve too much of an effort while you’re still in the hospital. But you will feel much more confident when you do go home if you have already started to regain your strength. You will also be less prone to falls or other accidents that might result from a weakened condition.

Planning a Program

Before you leave the hospital, physical therapists can assess your physical condition and come up with an appropriate set of exercises. Everyone has different wants and needs, so programs are usually customized. They will also be flexible, taking your energy level into account. The staff of the physical therapy department can also instruct you, your family, and other caregivers on how to proceed with your program at home. Their recommendations on an appropriate program may be essential to your recovery.

Safety Rules When you begin exercising, keep in mind a few simple rules for safety:

- Ask your doctor if you’re ready to exercise. Let him or her set limits to your activity.
- Have someone join you. This will make the exercise more enjoyable and safer, especially when you are just getting out of bed and may feel dizzy.
- Stop and rest if you feel tired or if your muscles are sore.
- Leave out any exercises that seem too difficult and try them another day when you feel stronger.
- Try to repeat each exercise three to five times at first, then gradually increase the repetitions to ten or twenty.
- Try to exercise at least twice a day, more often if you feel up to it.

The most important rule is to start out gradually. Don’t overdo it. Muscles that haven’t been used for days or weeks will strain very easily. Light warm-up exercises several times a day will be useful, both as a starting point for your program and as a daily prelude to more vigorous exercises later on.

When you start your exercise program, you might experience some fatigue, dizziness, or even nausea. Discuss any problems with your doctor or physical therapist. But these side effects usually pass fairly quickly.

Working Through the Stages A graduated program may take you through three stages, or you can use all three stages depending on how you feel:
• **Stage 1—Beginning-to-Move Exercises**
These are simple exercises that help you maintain and increase your range of motion. They don't require much exertion and can be done while you are lying in bed.

• **Stage 2—Increased-Activity Exercises**
A small weight (up to 2 pounds [1 kg]) is used to increase resistance. These exercises can be done when you are spending part of the day out of bed sitting in a chair.

• **Stage 3—Up-and-About Exercises**
These exercises will build up your strength when you are able to stand, walk, and spend the whole day out of bed. (For more detailed information, consult *Rehabilitation Exercises for the Cancer Patient*, by Ernest H. Rosenbaum, Francine Manuel, Judith Bray, Isadora R. Rosenbaum, and Arthur Cerf, available from Bull Publishing, PO Box 208, Palo Alto, CA 94302.)

**Setting a Regular Routine**
Once you are back on your feet and approaching your normal level of activity, you can establish a set routine, naturally within any limitations or restrictions identified by your doctor. A very enjoyable workout program can be created.

Aerobic programs are a helpful addition to the three-stage program. You take your pulse before beginning, then take it again halfway through and at the end of the routine. The aim is to roughly double your heart rate, although your physician may set a specific rate that you should not exceed.

There are a great number of aerobic programs to choose from. You may even alternate programs to avoid boredom. A variety of TV shows can take you through an aerobic workout every day, although aerobic programs need only be done for twenty minutes, three times a week, to achieve maximum benefits. If you have a VCR or DVD player, Jane Fonda or other celebrities can take you step by step through a program with their videos. These videos are widely available and offer an ideal way to work up to a full routine. Some of the videos show a slower group on one side and a faster-paced group on the other. You can also stop the video or limit the number of repetitions. Most sport stores and movie rental stores carry these tapes and DVDs. Some carry used tapes and DVDs at a discounted price.

If aerobics are not for you, there are all kinds of machines—stationary bikes, stair climbers, treadmills, rowing or skiing machines, and so on—that use weights or hydraulics to build all your muscles. Home equipment is worthwhile if you have a busy schedule and want to work out at your own pace at your own convenience. Some of these units are expensive, but some can be purchased at a more reasonable price, during special sales.

You can go to a health club if you want a variety of equipment to choose from and to be with people who are also working out. Or, if you don't feel comfortable with a formal program, there are always the options of stair climbing and brisk walking. You can go up and down your stairs at home for fifteen to twenty minutes every other day or take a long walk, perhaps during your lunch hour if you have returned to work, every other day. Whatever your routine, staying active will build up your body's reserves so that if you do need a temporary period of bed rest, your energy stores won't be depleted.

While you should think of your program as being as much a part of your recovery as visits to the doctor, try to enjoy yourself. Exercising can be a lot of fun. And it can be very stimulating. If you have days when depression and boredom get you down and exercising seems like too much of a burden, just remind
yourself of all the benefits of exercising regularly. Your program will improve your energy level and stamina, improve your appetite, help you relax, and help you sleep at night. The more you exercise, the better you will feel.