

Exercise: Before or After Cancer, it's Good Medicine

By Nikki Couloumbis, MSOTR/L, CKTP, CLT



By now it's old news that exercise protects us against heart disease. However, many people are still unaware of the mounting evidence that exercise can help prevent certain cancers. Numerous studies have now demonstrated that maintaining an active lifestyle can cut the risk of colon, breast, uterine, and prostate cancers.

Exercise for Cancer Prevention

Multiple studies have linked increased levels of physical activity with significantly lower risk of cancer. The connection between exercise and prevention has been especially clear for breast and colon cancers. In 2009 the British Journal of Cancer published a meta-analysis of 52 studies on exercise and colon cancer, concluding that the greater one's level of physical activity, the lower the risk of colon cancer. Additionally, physical activity on-the-job has been found to "count" when it comes to colon cancer prevention, with studies at USC and the University of Minnesota confirming that men with physically active occupations (carpenters, plumbers, landscapers, etc) have a risk of colon cancer much lower than that of men with sedentary or desk jobs.

Exercise also reduces breast cancer risks. The Nurses' Health Study at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston found that exercising one hour each day cut a woman's risk of breast cancer by 20%. A study in Norway found that women exercising 4 hours per week were one-third less likely to get the disease. And an older Harvard University study compared female athletes and non-athletes in 1987. Postmenopausal women defined as formerly athletic (on a varsity team or following a consistent exercise regimen) experienced half as many breast cancers and one-third the reproductive cancers as compared to the postmenopausal women who had been sedentary.

How does exercise prevent cancer? It promotes swifter passage of carcinogenic wastes through the intestinal tract, reducing the amount of time spent in

the body. Exercise reduces circulating blood sugar and hormone levels, leaving less available to feed and stimulate tumors. Exercise also improves the body's immune response to pathogens and

rogue cells. And, of course, it helps reduce obesity, to which 25% of cancer cases worldwide are attributed by the International Agency for Research on Cancer.

The American Cancer Society states one-third of cancer cases in the U.S. are caused by the effects of a sedentary lifestyle, and recommends exercising at moderate to high intensity 5 days per week for a *minimum* of 30 minutes, with 45-60 minutes being ideal. The critical key is *intensity*: moderately vigorous activity is considered most effective for prevention.

Exercise after Cancer Diagnosis

Exercise is also a therapeutic tool *during* cancer treatment. It has been shown to maintain blood counts and reduce fatigue and depression during chemotherapy. Observational data from The Nurses' Health Study suggests improved survival rates among women with breast cancer who exercise regularly. And, a recent study revealed that breast cancer survivors participating in a *supervised program of specific exercises* were *less* likely to experience lymphatic complications than if they had not exercised, a finding that defies routine medical advice!

For years, it has been believed that women with breast cancer must not stress the arm on the involved side of their body in order to avoid a painful swelling of the limb known as lymphedema. Many of my own patients gave up weightlifting and other activities they enjoyed. However, a 2009 study published in the New England Journal of Medicine compared two groups of women with lymphedema; one group continued the standard therapeutic exercises prescribed for the condition, and the other group did twice-weekly supervised training sessions using light weights for 13 weeks,

after which they continued the program unsupervised for another 39 weeks.

The researchers found that swelling did *not* increase in the weight-lifting group, and that exacerbations occurred *less than half* as frequently as in the control group! The lead researcher stated that progressive training of the affected arm made it less likely that women would experience strain and overuse during daily activities. Furthermore, the overall fitness levels of the weightlifting group increased significantly, leaving them fitter than before their diagnosis.

Summary

Exercise builds a stronger body, helps prevent disease, and improves outcomes in the event of illness. Everyone can benefit from the preventive effects of exercise, but if you are a cancer patient or survivor, your needs are unique! Seek expert clinical guidance from a licensed therapist who can provide you with an appropriate, customized exercise program. *

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About the Author

Nikki completed her master's degree in occupational therapy at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1994. The owner of On-Site Wellness, LLC, she is a Certified Lymphedema Therapist, Certified Kinesiotaping Practitioner, and Certified Strength Training Specialist. She has focused on the prevention and treatment of upper limb disorders and injuries of all kinds, and has extensive experience treating lymphedema. Nikki's lymphedema services include complete decongestive therapy (CDT), garment fitting, lymphatic kinesiotaping, periodic "maintenance" sessions, and specialized fitness training for cancer survivors. For appointments call 240-285-6514.

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