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Cancer and exercise do mix

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When you hear the word “cancer” probably the last thing that you think of is physical activity. In fact, most of us think of cancer as a death sentence. Treatments for cancer make many people feel lousy and the side effects of treatment include fatigue, anxiety, nausea, vomiting and pain. So it is hardly surprising that people who are diagnosed with cancer are not reaching for their running shoes or gym kit.

The perception of cancer as a death sentence is incorrect. Of course people die from the disease, but the prognosis for many people diagnosed with the disease is pretty good.

At any one time, there are about 25m people living with cancer in the world. Many people diagnosed with cancer are likely to die of something else. This means that helping the millions of people who have been diagnosed and treated for cancer to live a long and healthy life is a goal worth striving for.

Physical activity can help people manage the side effects of cancer treatment. Being physically active during and after treatment improves cardio-respiratory fitness, muscle strength, physical well-being,

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quality of life, and reduces fatigue, anxiety and depression.

People who are physically active after cancer are also more likely to live longer than those who are not physically active, especially after breast cancer, colon cancer and prostate cancer. Health professionals around the world recommend that people diagnosed with cancer get physically active.

Yet most people, during and after treatment for cancer, are not physically active. In fact, people reduce their amount of physical activity after a cancer diagnosis and treatments.

How much is enough?

Getting the health benefits from physical activity does not mean having to run marathons or pump iron (although some people after cancer treatment do quite happily engage in vigorous physical activity).

The recommended amount of physical activity for people with cancer is the same as for the general public: 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity each week. This can be broken down into about five 30-minute brisk walks a week. Muscle strengthening exercises are also recommended. However, treatment can really zap people and they should not feel bad about being unable to do the recommended amount.



Drugs can make it difficult. Shutterstock

One reason for the drop in activity in those with cancer is that doctors and nurses rarely give advice about physical activity to patients, so it's understandable why people are not physically active after a cancer diagnosis. And many of us still believe that when you're ill you should rest up.

There are of course other barriers to being physically active beside lack of information and advice from oncologists. A key barrier in most countries is the lack of provision of cancer rehabilitation to promote and support physical activity.

All this is not to polarise medicine versus physical activity. Nor is it to champion physical activity as the miracle cure for all of the problems that people during and after cancer treatment face. Yet, being physically active during and after cancer treatment has many health benefits. This is why for people diagnosed with cancer it is important to promote exercise as medicine.

Alongside getting the best possible medical treatment people should also get the best possible exercise treatment.



Cancer Exercise Physical activity