

Exercise for people living with cancer



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Acknowledgements

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Exercise for people living with cancer

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Introduction

This booklet is written for people with cancer, their families and their friends. It aims to help people understand the importance of exercise and also provides information about the benefits exercise may have during and after cancer treatments.

Why exercise?

Much of the research to date on exercise and cancer has focused on cancer prevention. Recently however, research has started to examine the effectiveness of exercise programs for cancer patients. All of the evidence collected so far suggests that exercise has a beneficial role for most patients during cancer treatment. The evidence also shows that there is very little risk of harm if care is taken and professional exercise advice is followed closely.

Cancer treatment causes a range of side effects that are different for different people. Exercise has been shown to effectively combat many of the side effects of cancer treatment, including:

- Fatigue
- Nausea (feeling sick) and anorexia (loss of appetite)
- Anaemia (low red blood cell and/or haemoglobin count)
- Depression and anxiety
- Body weight and composition (muscle and fat) changes

These are all good reasons to make exercise a part of your cancer treatment.

Who should exercise?

Most people being treated for cancer are able to participate in a comprehensive exercise program. Some people need a modified program and others may have to delay starting a program.

If you have any of the following problems, you may need a modified exercise program. Talk to your doctor before starting a program.

- Lymphoedema
- Anaemia
- Compromised immune function
- Radiation therapy burns
- Fatigue
- Primary or metastatic bone cancer (cancer involving your bones)
- Low platelet count
- Shortness of breath

You will need to delay the start of an exercise program if you have any of the following problems:

- Severe anaemia
- Fever
- Severe cachexia (weight loss)

Getting started

Starting an exercise program can be overwhelming. No doubt you have a lot of questions. If you are being treated for cancer, or have recently stopped treatment, it is important that you talk with your doctor before starting an exercise program.

To start with it is a good idea to consider seeking expert advice or joining a supervised exercise program. Medicare provides some limited cover for visits to many of these professionals and programs. Ask your GP for a referral to an exercise specialist.

No matter what option you select, if it has been a while since you have been active it is important to start slowly. Find a routine that suits you. If you enjoy an activity you're more like to stick with it. Consider inviting a friend to join you. Many people find the social aspects of exercise to be the most enjoyable.

Exercise equipment

Physical activity, or exercise, is not something that needs expensive equipment. Exercise equipment is big business but it is not necessary to have all of the latest gear.

Appropriate shoes are vital and help prevent injury later on. A podiatrist or reputable shoe shop can help you select the right shoes.

It is also important that you wear loose, comfortable clothes - shorts and a t-shirt - when you are exercising.

Other equipment, such as heart rate monitors and home-gym systems can certainly be useful, but are definitely not necessary. Most exercises can be done without the need for any additional equipment.

Selecting an exercise program

There are many ways that you can be physically active without too much cost or inconvenience. You might choose to exercise at home or you might prefer the structure and safety of a supervised exercise program. For many people the best option is a mix of exercising at home and a supervised exercise program.

If you choose a supervised exercise program, ask questions about the level and quality of the supervision provided. Look for a program run by a qualified exercise physiologist or physiotherapist.

Wherever you choose to be physically active, it is important that you consider your comfort, health and safety.

Who to talk to

Before taking part in any exercise program, either during or soon after your treatment, it is important to talk with your oncologist or GP. Tell the doctor what you plan to do and ask if there are any additional precautions you should take.

Exercise professionals - such as exercise physiologists and physiotherapists - are health professionals specifically trained to give advice on exercise. Your exercise physiologist or physiotherapist can work with you and/or your doctor to ensure an appropriate exercise prescription. Many structured exercise programs will ask you for medical clearance before starting.

Exercise for people living with cancer

Warm-up

It is important to warm-up at the start of each exercise session. Warming up helps to get you going and reduces your chance of injury. After the warm-up your muscles are warm and loose, and your heart rate is slightly higher than at rest.

A warm-up should include 5-10 minutes of low-intensity aerobic work mixed with some light stretching. Walking outside and using the indoor equipment are good warm-up activities. If you are going to do some weights, it is a good idea to use light weights in your warm-up. A couple of lighter sets prepares the muscles and joints for the exercises to come.

Training

Training is the part of an exercise program when the work is done. Different types of training have specific effects on your body. Each week you should try to include a variety of activities from the three types of exercise:

- Aerobic exercises
- Resistance exercises
- Flexibility exercises

Aerobic exercises

Aerobic exercises use large muscle groups and cause your heart rate to rise during the exercise. Aerobic training makes strenuous tasks easier and improves heart and lung fitness. Everyone should aim for 20-60 minutes of moderate to vigorous aerobic exercise on most days. This can be continuous or broken up in lots of 10 or more minutes.

Popular aerobic exercises include walking, hiking, cycling, jogging, running, rowing and swimming. The activities should be done at a level you are comfortable with, but try to vary the duration and intensity. It is important to choose activities that you enjoy. Also, why not try some new activities for a bit of variety?

Resistance exercises

Resistance exercises use weights to increase muscle strength and endurance. A resistance (or weight) training program results in:

- Increased muscle function and strength
- Improved body composition with increased muscle mass
- Increased bone mass and bone mineral density

Resistance training does not need expensive machines, it can be done using:

- Your own bodyweight
- Free weights
- Elastic resistance

Resistance training is an important part of any exercise program, but incorrect technique can be harmful. It is important that you follow instruction closely and stop immediately if you start to experience pain.

Resistance exercises should be performed 2-4 times (sessions) each week, on non-consecutive days. Complete 1-4 sets of 6-9 different exercises each session. Choose exercises that target the major functional muscles of the arms, legs and trunk. Each set should include 6-10 repetitions of the movement. It is important to maintain good technique during the set and rest for 60-90 seconds between sets.

Once you are comfortable with the program try to push yourself by:

- Increasing the number of repetitions, from 6 to 10; then
- Increasing the number of sets, from 1 to 4, dropping the number of repetitions back to 6 each time a set is added; then
- Increasing the load or resistance and reducing the number of repetitions and sets.

Flexibility exercises

Flexibility exercises (stretches) lengthen muscles and tendons. Stretching improves or maintains the flexibility and strength of joints and muscles. Joint and muscle flexibility is reduced by some cancer treatments and naturally as we get older. Regular stretching helps to delay any reduction in flexibility and overcome stiffness.

Stretch 3-4 times each week. Complete 2-4 sets of 4-6 different stretches. Include stretches for arm, leg and trunk flexibility. Hold each stretch for 15-30 seconds.

Cool-down

Cooling down is just as important as warming up. The cool-down allows your heart rate and blood pressure to gently return to normal. Also, a slow cool-down helps your body and muscles lose the heat gained during the activity.

A cool-down should involve 5-10 minutes of relaxed activity and/or light stretching. If you have just finished an aerobic exercise session, slow walking or cycling is the best way to cool down. If you have done resistance training, light stretching is the best way to cool down.

Overcoming common side effects

Lymphoedema

Appropriate aerobic and resistance training should not increase lymphoedema. Starting an exercise program early in treatment may lower the risk and/or severity of lymphoedema. Stretching programs and range-of-motion (ROM) exercises are recommended for people with lymphoedema. Talk to your doctor, physiotherapist, or exercise physiologist if you experience lymphoedema or are worried about it.

Fatigue

Fatigue is one of the most frequently reported side effects of all cancer treatments. Fatigue can be managed in an exercise program by carefully monitoring your condition and making adjustments to the exercise intensity and volume. To effectively combat fatigue, an exercise program should include aerobic, flexibility and resistance training components.

It is important to keep doing even a light amount of exercise during times of excessive fatigue. By stopping activity entirely you risk losing fitness and strength which can make the fatigue worse. Stretching, range-of-motion (ROM), yoga and tai chi style activities may be better tolerated during periods of excessive fatigue. Complementary therapies can also be part of a comprehensive fatigue management program.

Anaemia

Anaemia (low blood red blood cell and/or haemoglobin count) is another common side effect of cancer treatment. Symptoms of anaemia include unexplained tiredness and fatigue. If anaemia is severe, it is recommended that exercise is delayed. If anaemia is less severe, you should participate in a modified exercise program, with gradual increases. Aerobic activity has been shown to improve anaemia. Good nutrition is important too.

Compromised immunity

Some cancers and treatments stop the immune system from working properly. When this happens the immune system is compromised and there is an increased risk of infection. A modified exercise program can improve immunity without overloading the immune system. When white blood cell (neutrophil) count is low it is important to reduce the risk of cross-infection by limiting physical contact with other people and by cleaning any shared equipment prior to use. When immunity is severely compromised (neutropaenia), public gymnasiums, swimming pools and training venues should be avoided.

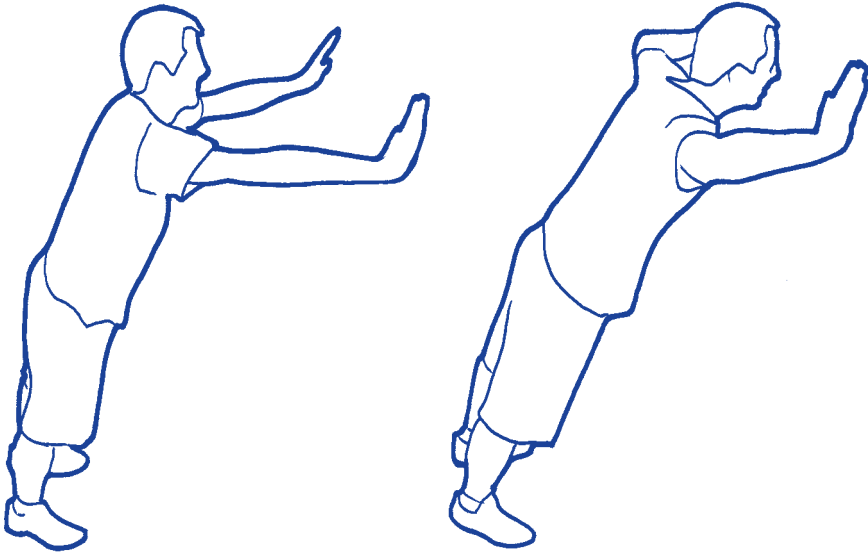
Radiation therapy

Areas of skin affected by radiation therapy can be extremely sensitive and often uncomfortable. It is important that you choose activities that limit abrasion or rubbing of clothing around affected parts of the body. If you are having radiation therapy, avoid water-based exercise programs.

Sample exercise prescription

	Aerobic	Resistance	Flexibility
Sunday	60 minutes moderate-intensity walking	Rest	Rest
Monday	30-45 minutes moderate-intensity cycling, rowing, walking or swimming	Rest	Rest
Tuesday	Optional 20-30 minutes moderate- to vigorous-intensity cycling, rowing, walking or swimming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Push-up (standing or modified) • Calf raise • Standing row • Squat (or chair rise) • Shoulder press • Standing leg curl • Lateral arm raise • Triceps extension • Biceps curl • Bird-cat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shoulder stretch • Triceps stretch • Pectoral and biceps stretch • Quadriceps stretch • Calf stretch • Hamstrings and lower back stretch • Lower back stretch
Wednesday	30-45 minutes moderate-intensity cycling, rowing, walking or swimming	Rest	Rest
Thursday	Optional 20-30 minutes moderate- to vigorous-intensity cycling, rowing, walking or swimming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Push-up (standing or modified) • Calf raise • Standing row • Squat (or chair rise) • Shoulder press • Standing leg curl • Lateral arm raise • Triceps extension • Biceps curl • Bird-cat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shoulder stretch • Triceps stretch • Pectoral and biceps stretch • Quadriceps stretch • Calf stretch • Hamstrings and lower back stretch • Lower back stretch
Friday	30-45 minutes moderate-intensity cycling, rowing, walking or swimming	Rest	Rest
Saturday	Rest	Optional, choose from <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Push-up (standing or modified) • Calf raise • Standing row • Squat (or chair rise) • Shoulder press • Standing leg curl • Lateral arm raise • Triceps extension • Biceps curl • Bird-cat 	Optional, choose from <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shoulder stretch • Triceps stretch • Pectoral and biceps stretch • Quadriceps stretch • Calf stretch • Hamstrings and lower back stretch • Lower back stretch

Exercise technique



Standing push-up

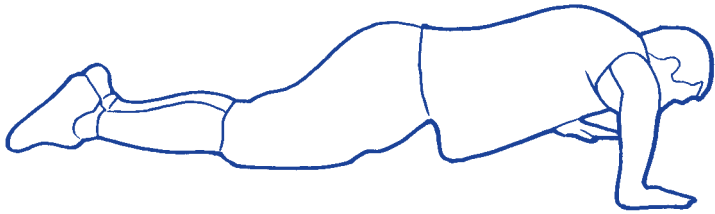
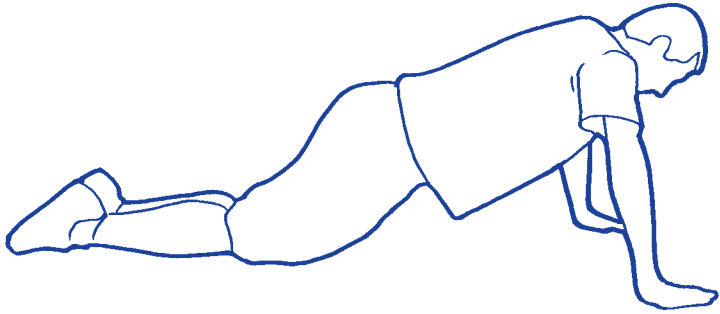
Muscle groups:

Chest and shoulders

Technique:

Start standing with your feet shoulder-width apart. Lean slightly against the wall with outstretched arms. Do not lock your elbows. Slowly move your body towards the wall, bending your arms at the elbow. Once your nose is close to the wall, push away, against your body weight. Breathe out when pushing away.

Modified push-up



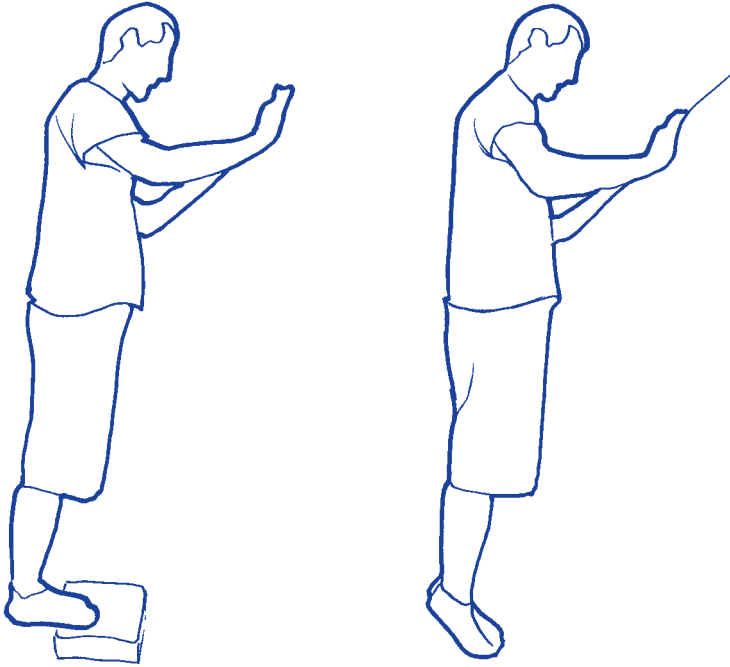
Muscle groups:

Chest and shoulders

Technique:

Start with your knees and hands on the floor and your arms extended. Make sure your back and bottom are as straight as possible. Lower your trunk slowly, bending your arms at the elbow. Push up; try not to lock your elbows at the top. Breathe out when pushing up.

Calf raise



Muscle group:

Calves

Equipment:

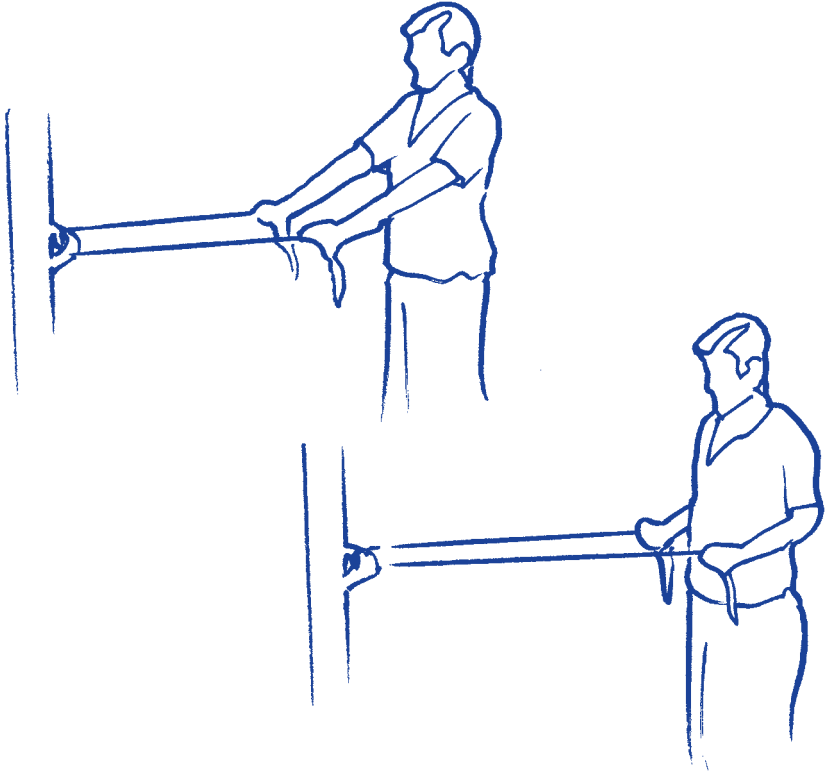
Step (optional)

Technique:

Stand upright, with a wall as support if necessary. Extend your feet (pointing the toes) and lift your body straight up. Breathe out whilst lifting.

Increase the difficulty slightly by standing on a small step and/or holding weights in your hands.

Standing row



Muscle groups:

Shoulders, back and triceps

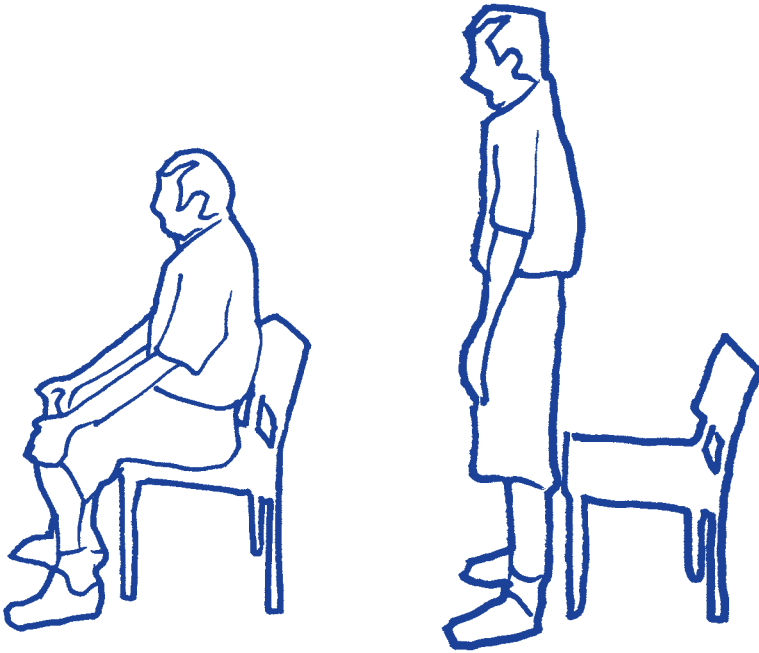
Equipment:

Elastic resistance band

Technique:

Stand with your arms outstretched and your hands at waist height. Pull the resistance by drawing your elbows backwards and maintaining hands at waist height. Breathe out while pulling the resistance. Make sure your spine does not move.

Chair rise



Muscle groups:

Quads and gluteals (buttocks)

Equipment:

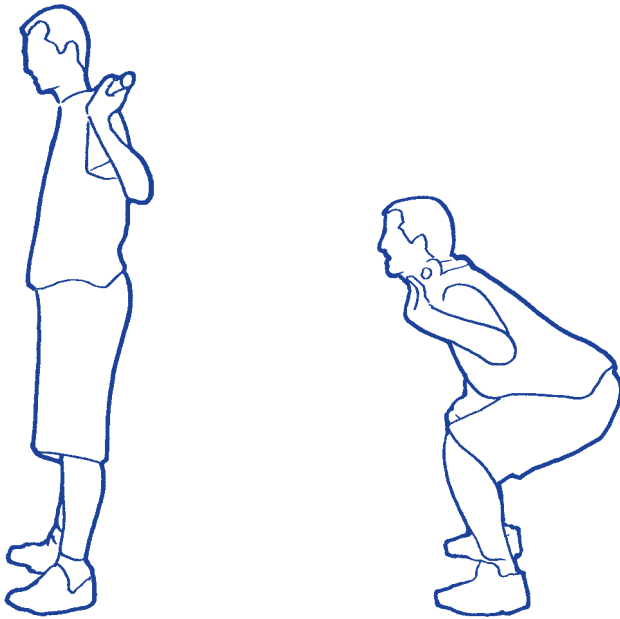
Chair

Technique:

Sit with your hands on your knees. Stand up, using your hands on knees for assistance if necessary. Breathe out while standing

Increase the difficulty by standing without assistance. Then try with your arms across your chest. When standing unassisted, stand in one movement without rocking.

Squat



Muscle groups:

Quads and gluteals (buttocks)

Equipment:

Barbell, gymstick or a pole (a broomstick is ok). Chair (optional)

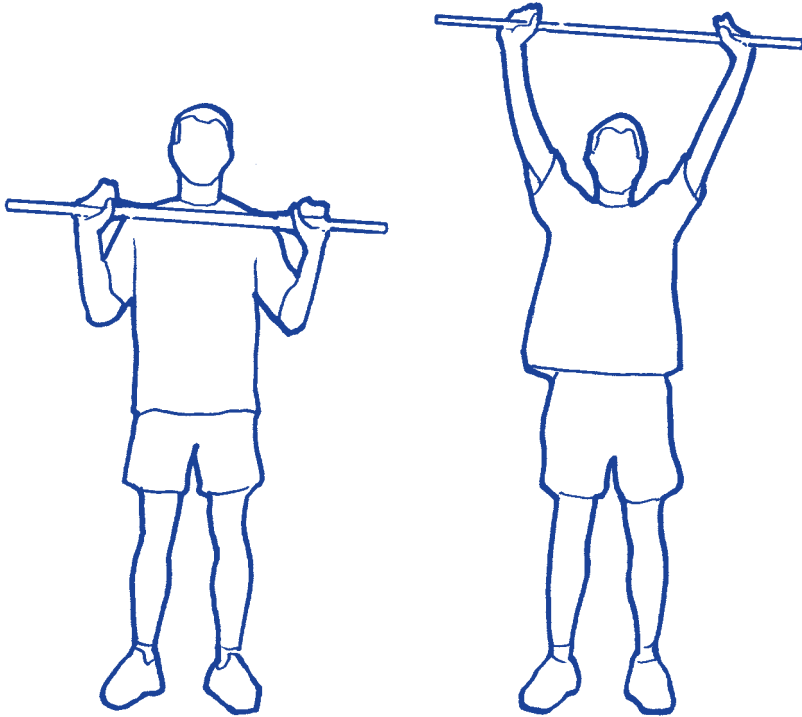
Technique:

Stand upright with the bar just below your shoulders. Have your feet flat on the floor, shoulder-width apart. Squat down by bending your knees and hips. Do not bend your knees past 90 degrees and keep your feet flat on the floor. Return to the starting position by straightening your knees and hips.

Start with a chair behind you, touching (but not resting) your bottom on the chair on each repetition.

Increase the difficulty by adding resistance (weights or elastic) to the bar.

Shoulder press



Muscle group:

Shoulders

Equipment:

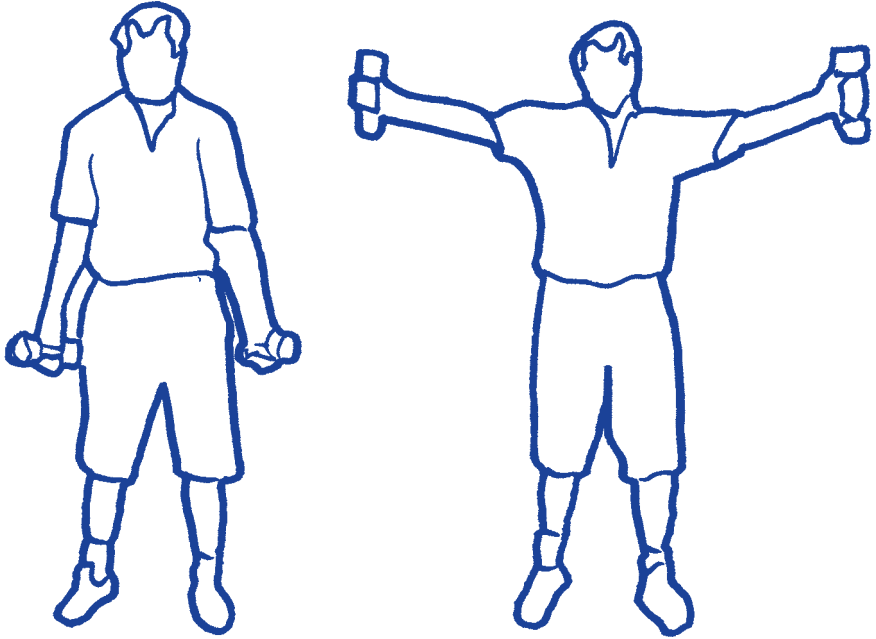
Barbell, gymstick, hand-held weights or a pole (a broomstick is ok)

Technique:

Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart. Hold the bar at chest height with your elbows almost completely bent (almost touching sides). Push the bar upwards, straightening your arm at the elbow and flexing your shoulder. Breathe out during the lift and maintain good posture at all times.

Increase the difficulty by adding weight or elastic resistance to the bar.

Lateral arm raise



Muscle group:

Shoulders

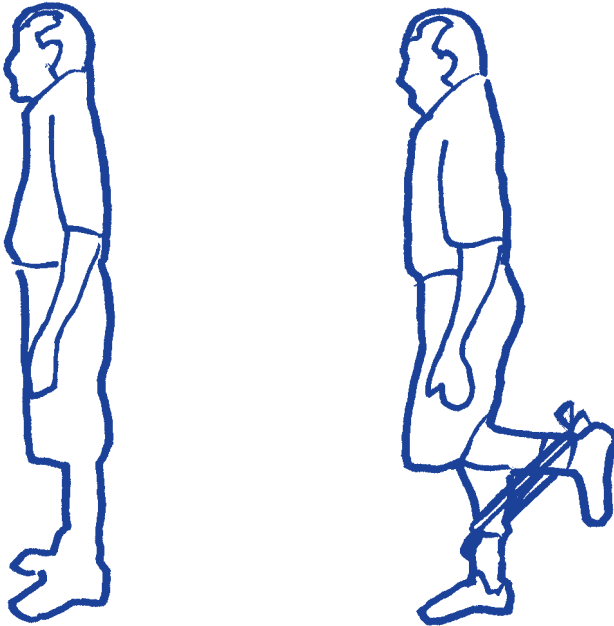
Equipment:

Hand-held weights

Technique:

Stand with you arms by your side. Hold the weights with your wrists pointing forward. Lift your arms slowly outwards (abduction) until horizontal. Breathe out when lifting the resistance. Maintain your head and neck position, looking straight ahead.

Standing leg curl



Muscle group:

Hamstrings

Equipment:

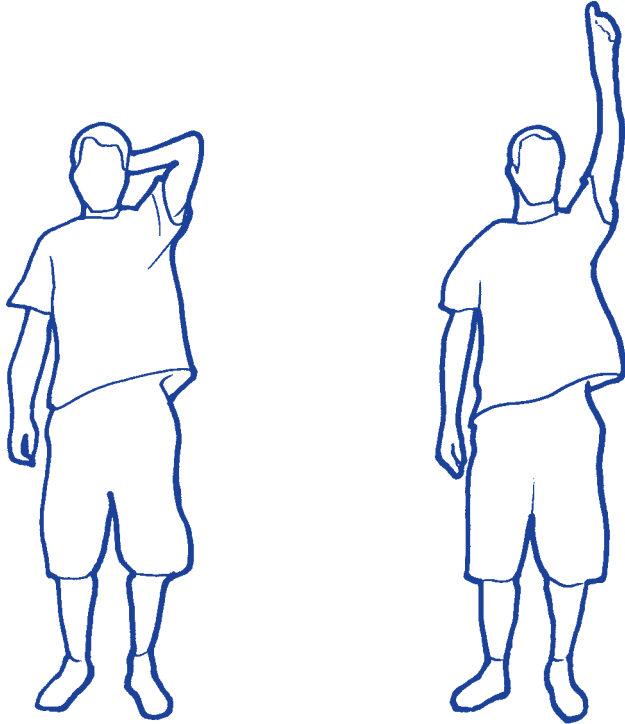
Elastic resistance band (approximately 1.5 metres in a loop)

Technique:

Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and the elastic wrapped around your ankles. Stand close to a wall or chair in case you need support. Raise one leg by bending your knee to approximately 90 degrees. Breathe out when lifting the leg.

Start without the elastic resistance.

Triceps extension



Muscle group:

Triceps

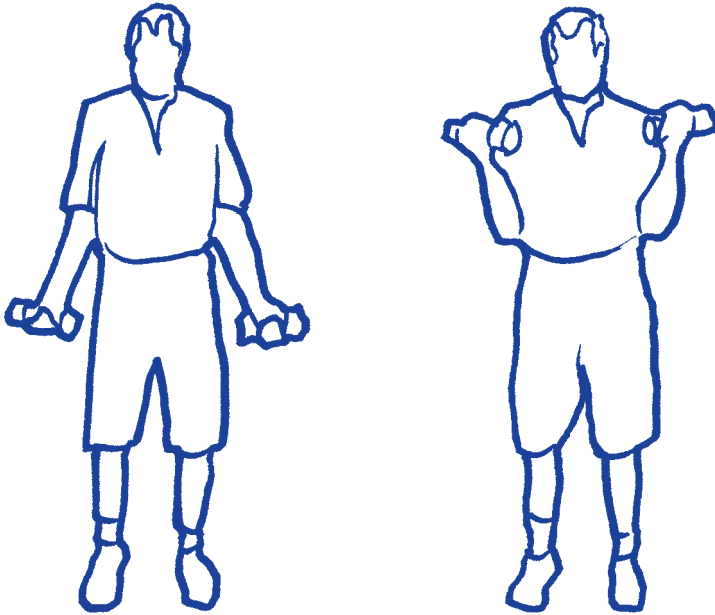
Equipment:

Hand-held weights

Technique:

Stand with one arm by your side. In the other hand, hold the weight behind your head, with your elbow pointing upwards and looking straight ahead. Without moving your shoulder, straighten your arm and move the weight upwards. Breathe out when lifting the resistance.

Biceps curl



Muscle group:

Biceps

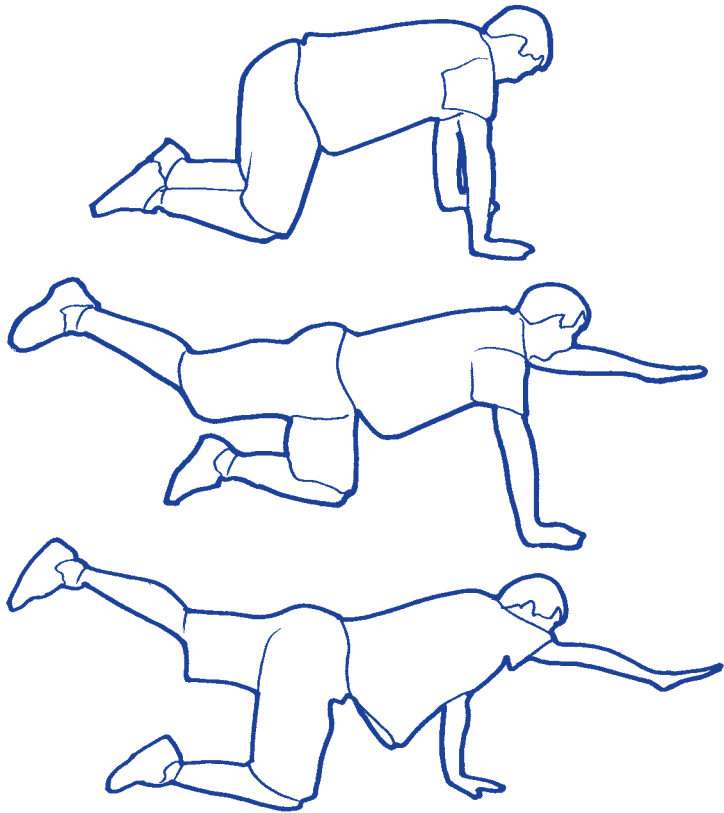
Equipment:

Hand-held weights, gymstick or barbell

Technique:

Stand with you arms by your side. Hold the weights with your wrists pointing forward. Lift the weights forward and up in a smooth motion by bending both elbows. Make sure that you do not move your shoulders and your body does not sway during the lift. Breathe out during the lift. Slowly return to the starting position.

Bird-cat



Muscle group:

Core stability

Technique:

Start on all fours. Slowly extend one leg and the opposite arm at the same time. Pause in this position then slowly return to all fours. Change sides and repeat the same position. Maintain normal breathing.

Start by extending one leg while supporting the trunk with both arms on the floor.

Increase the difficulty by holding your arm and leg in the extended position for 5-20 seconds.

Shoulder stretch



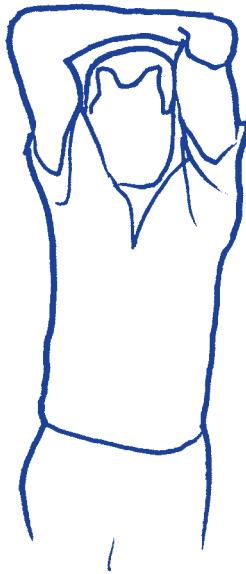
Muscle group:

Shoulder

Technique:

Pull one arm across your chest. Keep your elbow just below the shoulder-line. Hold the position for 15-30 seconds. Repeat the exercise for the other side.

Triceps stretch



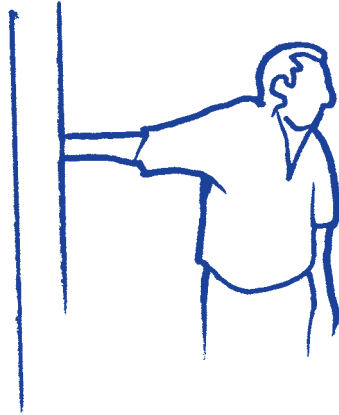
Muscle group:

Triceps

Technique:

Raise one arm with your elbow bent and your forearm down your back. Using the elbow as a lever, pull the arm down your back. Hold the stretch for 15-30 seconds. Perform the exercise for both sides.

Pectoral and biceps stretch



Muscle groups:

Chest and shoulder

Technique:

Raise one arm to your side. With your arm straight at shoulder height hold a wall or a pole with your hand. Partially rotate your body away from the arm holding the wall/pole. Hold the stretch for 15-30 seconds. Perform on both sides.

Quadriceps stretch



Muscle group:

Quadriceps

Technique:

Stand on one leg, with a wall or chair for support if necessary. Hold your foot with the opposite arm and pull the leg upwards by the ankle. Keep your trunk straight. Hold the stretch for 15-30 seconds. Perform for both sides.

Calf stretch



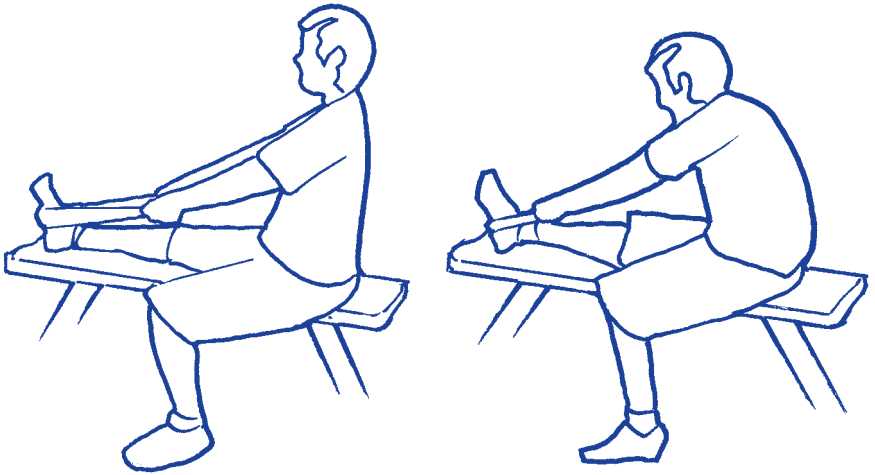
Muscle group:

Calf

Technique:

Stand with one foot in front of the other and feet parallel. Lean forward against a wall and partially bend your front leg. Keep your back leg (stretching leg) completely extended, with your foot flat on the floor - move it backwards until you feel the stretch. Perform for both sides.

Hamstrings and lower back stretch



Muscle groups:

Hamstrings and lower back

Equipment:

Elastic resistance band and bench

Technique:

Sit with one leg extended on a bench. Put the elastic tight around your foot with your back upright and straight. Loosen the elastic band by leaning forward from the hips. Keep your back straight

Alternatively stand on one leg with the other foot on a step (~30 cm high). Lean forward from the hips, pushing your chest towards your knee. Keep your back straight.

Hold this position for 15-30 seconds. Perform on both sides.

Lower back stretch



Muscle group:

Lower back

Equipment:

Chair

Technique:

Sit forward with your feet on the ground and knees partially bent. Curl your trunk forward and hold for 15-30 seconds.

Pelvic floor

Your pelvic floor muscles span the bottom of your pelvis and support your bowel and bladder, plus your uterus if you're a woman. As well as providing support, strong pelvic floor muscles are important for:

- Control of urination (elimination of waste from the bladder) and defecation (elimination of waste from the bowel)
- Normal sexual function
- Stability of the abdomen and spine

Like other muscles, your pelvic floor can become weak. There are a number of factors that can contribute to pelvic floor weakness or damage, including:

- Age
- Childbirth
- Straining on the toilet (constipation)
- Obesity
- Chronic cough
- Heavy lifting
- Abdominal or pelvic surgery

It is important that you see a physiotherapist or continence advisor before attempting pelvic floor exercises if you experience any of the following signs of pelvic floor muscle weakness:

- Leaking urine or faeces during coughing, sneezing, laughing or exercising
- Having to go to the toilet urgently
- Difficulty controlling bowel movements and wind
- Feeling like you haven't emptied your bowel
- Dragging, heaviness or vaginal bulge
- Lack of sexual sensation

Pelvic floor muscle exercises

It is important to accurately identify your pelvic floor muscles. You can feel them when you stop the flow of urine midway through emptying your bladder. Try stopping the flow for a couple of seconds to identify the muscles that control the flow of urine. Another way is to feel the muscles you use when you imagine that you are stopping the flow of urine and holding in flatus (wind). This can be done standing, sitting or lying.

It is important that you have good technique when you're doing pelvic floor muscle exercises. If your technique is poor the exercise may be pointless or worse you risk injury.

Start by relaxing all of your pelvic floor and abdominal (tummy) muscles. Squeeze in and hold your pelvic floor muscles while you continue to breathe normally. If your technique is correct, you may notice some tensing or flattening of the tummy below the belly button, but not above it. Some people try too hard and end up contracting the muscles around the pelvic floor. This is not good technique. If you can not feel your pelvic floor muscles lifting and squeezing try changing positions. Different people find pelvic floor muscles exercises easier standing, sitting or lying down.

Once you are experienced at isolating your pelvic floor muscles, try and hold the contraction for up to ten seconds. Continue to breathe normally during the contraction. Repeat the exercise up to ten times, with ten to twenty seconds rest between contractions. Do it at different times throughout each day to improve the strength of your pelvic floor muscles.

How hard should exercise be?

It is important to find the balance between not working hard enough and working too hard. If you do not work hard enough, you may not achieve your exercise goals. If you work too hard you risk injury. There are a number of ways to find out if you are working at an appropriate level:

- Talk test
- Rating of perceived exertion (RPE)
- Heart rate

Talk test

The talk test is one way for you to work out how hard an aerobic activity is. If you are able to sing, the activity is probably too light for any real benefit. During moderate activity you should be able to carry on a conversation, but may need to pause for breath from time-to-time. If you start to provide one-word answers the activity is becoming more vigorous. Finally, during vigorous activity you will find it difficult to speak. Try to exercise at an intensity so you can still hold conversation.

Rating of perceived exertion (RPE)

RPE is often used by exercise professionals to assess the intensity of an activity. It is a tool that you might find useful too. It can be used by all ages during aerobic and resistance training. To use RPE ask yourself 'How hard am I working?'. Find the number that best describes what you feel.

Try an exercise in the range 12-16, as seen below.

6	No exertion at all
7	Extremely light (7.5)
8	
9	Very light
10	
11	Light
12	
13	Somewhat hard
14	
15	Hard (heavy)
16	
17	Very hard
18	
19	Extremely hard
20	Maximal exertion

Heart rate

Heart rate is another method for assessing the intensity of exercise. Measuring your heart rate during physical activity allows you to calculate the exercise intensity. Heart rate is not a good measure for people on some medications, so check with your doctor first. If your heart rate becomes too high or drops too low during the exercise you should stop what you're doing and consult your doctor again.

Measuring your heart rate

The simplest way to measure heart rate is to count your pulse at the wrist or neck for 15 seconds and multiply the number of beats counted by four. This answer gives you the beats per minute. Inexpensive heart rate monitors are also available.

$$HR_{\max} = 220 - \text{age (in years)}$$

The proposed intensity for cancer patients and survivors during aerobic activities is 60-90% of HR_{\max}

	AGE									
	20	25	30	35	40	45	50	55	65	70
100%	200	195	190	185	180	175	170	165	155	150
90%	180	176	171	167	162	158	153	149	140	135
80%	160	156	152	148	144	140	136	132	124	120
70%	140	137	133	130	126	123	119	116	109	105
60%	120	117	114	111	108	105	102	99	93	90
50%	100	98	95	93	90	88	85	83	78	75

What should I eat?

Eating well means giving your body the food it needs to keep working properly.

There is no special eating plan that can cure cancer and, in most cases, there are no special foods or food groups to eat or avoid if you have cancer. Cancer and its treatment place extra demands on your body, so eating well is more important than ever.

For most people with cancer, the best way to eat well is to eat a wide variety of foods from each of the food groups every day.

It is important that you stay properly hydrated during and after exercise. Have a water bottle nearby when you are exercising and take regular small sips.

The Cancer Council WA has a publication written specifically about nutrition for cancer patients. Please contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 for further information.

A note for carers

For most people exercise is a good social outlet, for some however it is an opportunity for time alone. People with cancer report similar experiences. Being aware of this will help you to decide whether to join in the activity or not. If you are invited to participate be sure to join in.

Whatever the person with cancer wants, you should provide all the support and encouragement you can. Positive, rather than cautionary, messages are important, particularly on days when motivation may be low.

Look after yourself

It is important to take care of your own wellbeing. Caring for someone who is unwell can be exhausting and stressful. If you can, try to arrange some time alone. Accept offers of help from family, friends and neighbours. Physical activity may help to overcome some of these stressors. You may prefer to be active by yourself or with someone else.

The Cancer Council WA has a number of publications written specifically for carers. Please contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 for further information.

Notes and information

Help and information

Your specialist, family doctor and nurses can tell you anything you want to know about your illness and your treatment.

You may want to contact a social worker or counsellor. They can be contacted through the social work department at your treatment hospital.

The Cancer Council WA provides many services for people affected by cancer, their carers, family and friends. These include:

- The Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20
- Cancer counselling service
- Cancer information and support groups
- Peer support
- Booklets and brochures
- Consumer advocacy
- Referral to services in your local area
- Complementary therapy program
- Lymphoedema management service

Call the Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20 for further information on any of the above services.

Information on the internet

The internet can be a useful source of information, although not all websites are reliable. Links to reliable websites can be found on The Cancer Council WA's website at cancerwa.asn.au. The Cancer Council also has a brochure that looks at how to find reliable cancer information on the internet. Phone the Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20 for a copy.



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For further information contact:

The Cancer Council

Helpline 13 11 20

statewide for the cost of a local call

Weekdays 8 am - 8 pm

TTY (08) 9381 6562



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*The Cancer Council WA is a non-government,
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