

Life After Cancer: How Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Can Help You Heal



Congratulations on completing cancer treatment! It's a big achievement.

While medical treatments have helped you come this far, you now have the power to make yourself even stronger and healthier. It starts by fueling your body with nutritious foods and getting plenty of movement in your day.

Why healthy habits matter after cancer

Cancer treatments take a major toll on your body. Choosing healthy foods and making movement a regular part of your life can help prevent many treatment-related issues and reduce the risk of your cancer coming back. A healthy lifestyle can help you:

- **Get stronger.** You can increase your strength, flexibility, and endurance through physical activity. Moving more can also help you stay at a weight that supports your health goals. That may help prevent the cancer from coming back or a new cancer from developing. Another way to strengthen your bones and muscles? Eating foods that offer plenty of protein, calcium, vitamins, and minerals.
- **Fight infection.** Many people have a higher risk for infection during and after cancer treatment. Eating healthy foods and staying active can give your immune system a boost.
- **Lower your odds for other health problems.** Some kinds of cancer treatment can raise your risk for heart disease and type 2 diabetes. But you can lower this risk by making smart food choices and moving more.
- **Boost your energy.** It's normal to feel fatigued after cancer treatment. Making healthy habits a part of your day may help you feel less tired.

What should you eat?

Eating healthy doesn't have to be bland or boring. And you don't have to cut out all your favorite foods either. The latest USDA [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) suggest picking foods that work for you based on your personal preferences, cultural background, and budget. After all, the best eating plan is one you will stick with for the long run.

When planning meals, try focusing on what you should eat *more* of. Healthy choices include:

- Vegetables and fruits. They have fiber to keep you full and nutrients you need to stay healthy.
- Whole grains. They can help lower your cholesterol and keep your blood sugar steady.
- Healthy protein. This can come from poultry, eggs, lean meats, fish, nuts, seeds, beans, peas, and tofu.
- Healthy oils. Try olive or canola oil instead of butter.
- Unsweetened drinks. Stay hydrated by choosing water, tea, or coffee without sugar.

Of course, there are foods you should try to limit, too. For example:

- Be careful about eating baked goods and snack foods. Many of them contain unhealthy refined grains, added sugar and salt, and saturated or trans fats.
- Avoid sugary drinks like juice and soda.
- Limit or stay away from red and processed meats.

- If you choose to drink alcohol, limit it to no more than 1 drink a day (for women) or 2 drinks a day (for men). One drink is 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof liquor.

To better visualize what healthy eating looks like, turn to [MyPlate](#). If you need more help, ask your healthcare provider to refer you to a dietitian. They can teach you about eating habits that will best fit your needs.

How much physical activity should you get?

Regular physical activity is crucial to your recovery and continued well-being. But how much movement do you need? The experts at the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#) say that adults should get at least 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity exercise, or at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise, each week.

That might sound like a lot, especially if you're not feeling your best after cancer treatment. But it's OK to gradually start with just a few minutes each day. As you get stronger, you can add more time.

If you enjoy swimming laps or taking yoga classes, great! But know that physical activity doesn't have to take place in a gym or studio. Anything you do to move more is good for you, and everyday activities also count. Gardening, doing chores, or going for a walk are great examples of exercise. Try exercising while doing other activities like listening to music or an audio book or watching TV.

Aim for a mix of aerobic and muscle-strengthening activities. In time, you can work your way up to 150 minutes each week. Just be sure to talk with your healthcare team first, even if you were physically active before cancer. They can help you figure out how to safely increase your activity level over time.

Getting to a healthy weight

Some people lose weight during cancer treatment. But many others gain weight due to hormonal changes. The best way to know what's healthiest for you is by talking with your provider. Together, you can plan out your goals and any support you need to get there.

Ask for help when you need it

At times, you may struggle to keep up with healthy habits after cancer treatment. Don't be discouraged. It's normal to notice changes that impact your day-to-day life. For instance:

- Side effects can make it hard to eat healthy foods. You may have nausea or a changed sense of taste.
- Surgery or radiation may have affected the way you chew, swallow, or digest food.
- Anxiety or depression can make it hard to stick with healthy eating habits or get moving.
- Fatigue and weakness can get in the way of staying active.

If you're having trouble, talk with your provider. They can help you figure out ways to manage these challenges, such as joining a support group or changing your medicine.

Remember, you are well on your way to a better life after cancer. Enjoy it and take pride in knowing you're doing everything you can to stay on the path to good health.

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