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Healthy Living After Cancer [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 10/2013

Key Messages:

- Although making healthy lifestyle choices, such as eating a nutritious diet, exercising regularly, and stopping tobacco use, is important for everyone, it is especially important for cancer survivors.
- Adopting healthy lifestyle habits reduces the risk of developing high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease and may reduce the risk of some cancers coming back after treatment.
- Staying in touch with your primary health care provider and your cancer care team and going to all scheduled follow-up appointments are other important ways to stay healthy after cancer.

After being diagnosed with cancer, many patients and survivors worry about the cancer coming back after treatment [3] and focus on what they can do to reduce their risk of recurrence. While there is evidence that making positive lifestyle changes [4] during and after cancer treatment may play a role in preventing a recurrence or second cancer, many survivors are more likely to develop other chronic health issues, such as:

- Obesity or being overweight
- Heart problems, such as congestive heart failure
- Osteoporosis [5] (thinning of the bones) and bone fractures (breaks)
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol levels
- Diabetes

You can help prevent and manage these health issues by talking with your primary care provider and your oncology team. They will address any of these health concerns and give you suggestions for improving your health and quality of life. These suggestions should include eating healthier foods, exercising more, stopping tobacco use, limiting the amount of alcohol you drink, and finding positive ways to manage stress.

Eating a healthy diet

Choosing to eat a diet filled with fresh fruits and vegetables and other unprocessed, low-fat foods helps cancer survivors regain strength after treatment. Nutritious eating can also reduce the risk

of heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity, and diabetes. In addition, recent research suggests that some cancer survivors who make healthy food choices may have a lower risk of recurrence and live longer. Although most of these studies have focused on breast cancer, researchers have also noted these benefits in survivors of colon cancer and prostate cancer who eat healthy diets.

According to many experts, the types of foods recommended to help prevent cancer are the same ones that protect against cancer recurrence. These experts recommend eating plant-based foods (such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains), lean protein, and low-fat dairy products, and avoiding highly processed foods and red meats as much as possible. Learn more about the effect of diet and nutrition [6] on cancer prevention and recurrence.

Doing physical activity regularly

Exercise is an important part of healthy living, and a number of research studies have shown that being physically active has a number of important benefits for cancer survivors. For example, exercising during and after cancer treatment helps:

- Reduce anxiety and fatigue
- Improve self-esteem
- Increase feelings of optimism
- Improve heart health
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Boost muscle strength and endurance

More recent studies have also shown that exercising regularly after being diagnosed with breast, colon, prostate, or ovarian cancer may help reduce the risk of recurrence and improve overall survival. For example, the Nurses? Health Study showed that women who walked three to five hours per week after being diagnosed with breast cancer had a lower risk of dying from the disease. Studies involving colon cancer survivors suggest that regular exercise reduces the risk of the cancer coming back by up to 50%.

Side effects from cancer and cancer treatment, such as fatigue [7] or sleep problems [8], often make it difficult to find the motivation to be active. It may help to talk with a certified health and fitness professional. You can find one through the American College of Sports Medicine [9].

Here are some additional tips to help you start exercising:

- If you have been inactive for a long time, start with 10 minutes of walking a day and build up.
- Add exercise to your everyday activities and chores by walking to the store, taking the stairs, or by parking farther away from an entrance.
- Exercise while doing other activities, such as watching television or listening to music.
- Find an exercise partner or group that keeps you motivated and provides friendly support.
- If you are coping with fatigue, try to exercise when you have the most energy.

Get more tips on physical activity [10], and read more about physical activity and cancer risk [11]. Remember to talk with your doctor before beginning an exercise program.

Other healthy lifestyle tips

There are a number of other things you can do to create and maintain a healthier life after cancer, such as:

Stay in touch with your health care team. Your doctor and other health care professionals can recommend and schedule follow-up care appointments to look for signs of recurrence and/or manage long-term side effects, answer questions about medications, and refer you to other specialists and support resources. Also, ask your doctor or another member of your health care team to help you fill out a cancer treatment plan and summary [12], a form that keeps track of information about your cancer and cancer treatment. You may also want to ask about getting a survivorship care plan to outline your follow-up care.

Learn how to cope with difficult feelings. Feelings of stress, anxiety [13], depression [14], and fear of recurrence [3] can slow a person's recovery and bring about new physical problems, such as sleeplessness, headaches, and stomach issues. Journaling [15], joining a support group [16], and practicing relaxation techniques may help you better cope with your emotions. Get more tips for managing stress [17].

Reach and maintain a healthy weight. Cancer survivors who are overweight or obese have an increased risk of the cancer coming back after treatment. Losing weight and keeping it off has been shown to help breast, prostate, and colorectal cancer survivors, and possibly others, live longer, healthier lives. Learn more about obesity, weight, and cancer risk [18].

Quit smoking and avoid secondhand smoke. Stopping tobacco use [19], even after a cancer diagnosis, can improve your recovery and overall health. In addition, avoid secondhand smoke [20] (smoke exhaled from a smoker's lungs and the smoke from a burning cigarette, cigar, or pipe). Nearly half of newly diagnosed lung cancers are attributed to what is referred to as ?involuntary? smoking. Read more about tobacco and cancer [21].

Protect your skin from the sun. You can reduce your risk of skin cancer by using a broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30 every day and wearing sun-protective clothing and broad-brimmed hats. Be even more cautious if you take medications that may make you more sensitive to the sun, such as certain antibiotics, anti-inflammatories, antifungals, and blood pressure medications. Learn more about protecting your skin from the sun [22].

Make time for fun. Get together with friends, watch a movie, walk the dog, or play with your kids. Laughter can reduce anxiety and improve your mood. Find out more about coping with cancer through humor [23].

More Information

Survivorship [24]

Managing Side Effects [25]

Dealing With Cancer Recurrence [26]

Additional Resources

[27]

LIVESTRONG Foundation: Planning for Healthy Living [27]

American Institute for Cancer Research: Diet?What We Eat [28]

American Cancer Society: Nutrition and Physical Activity During and After Cancer Treatment?Answers to Common Questions [29]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/survivorship/follow-care-after-cancer-treatment/healthy-living-after-cancer
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25241
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/24583
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/29711
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/24965
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/25048
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/25057
[9] http://members.acsm.org/source/custom/Online_locator/OnlineLocator.cfm
[10] http://www.cancer.net/node/24996
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[28] http://www.aicr.org/reduce-your-cancer-risk/diet/
[29] http://www.cancer.org/treatment/survivorshipduringandaftertreatment/nutritionforpeoplewithcancer/nutrition-and-physical-activity-during-and-after-cancer-treatment-answers-to-common-questions