

## 4 Components of an Effective Exercise Program for Survivors




Feedback

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***Carol Michaels*** (<http://www.carolmichaelsfitness.com/>) is the founder of Recovery Fitness®, a nationally recognized exercise program designed to help people diagnosed with cancer recover from surgery and other treatments. She is an award-winning exercise specialist, author, presenter, and consultant. She received her degree from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. Carol has produced DVDs and created the Cancer Specialist Recovery course in partnership with the National Federation

of Professional Trainers. Her book, *Exercises for Cancer Survivors*, is designed to help anyone undergoing cancer surgery or other treatments.

You've talked with your doctor about **starting an after-treatment exercise program** (<http://www.cancer.net/node/35541>), and are ready to get moving. **These 4 physical activities can empower you to take control of your physical and mental health.**  Not sure how to get started? Ask your doctor for recommendations of exercise specialists who can help you set up an exercise plan that's right for you.

## 1. Relaxation breathing

Cancer survivors face an emotional toll in addition to a physical one. Research shows that relaxation breathing can help reduce stress and anxiety during recovery. When people feel stressed, they usually take quick, shallow breaths. During relaxation breathing, the goal is to breathe slowly and deeply. Being aware of your breath can have a calming effect and allow you to focus your energy toward healing.

*Try this breathing exercise:* Inhale for 5 seconds, filling up your chest with air. Exhale from the lower abdomen for 5 seconds, pressing your belly button toward your spine. Imagine all of your tension and stress leaving your body with each exhalation.

## 2. Aerobic exercise

Aerobic exercise is essential to good health. It may seem strange, but moving your body can actually help decrease the fatigue that treatments can cause. You don't need to run a marathon to reap benefits. Any movement that elevates your heart rate and breathing counts as aerobic.

Walking is one of the easiest ways to get aerobic exercise. You might be able to walk for only a few minutes at first, but you'll gradually get stronger. Try to walk a little farther each session until you're able to walk for 30 to 45 minutes each day. If this isn't possible for you, aim for 15 minutes 1 to 3 times a day. Walking not your thing? Consider other aerobic activities you enjoy, such as hiking, dancing, cycling, or swimming.

## 3. Stretching

How often should you stretch? Every day for a year or longer, depending on your particular situation. Stretching regularly can gradually improve your posture, range of motion, and flexibility. The older you are the more important daily stretching is to maintain flexibility. At first, fatigue and low endurance may mean you can only stretch for a short period of time. If you had radiation therapy, your body may feel especially tight. But patience and practice will pay off. As you get stronger, you'll see more benefits. You may need to do each stretching exercise 2 to 5 times per day in the beginning of your recovery.

Here's what you need to know about safe stretching:

- Warm up for 5 to 10 minutes. For example, you can march in place or use a stationary bicycle while swinging your arms.
- Move slowly, with controlled movements. Avoid bouncy motions. Doing the stretches slowly allows tissues to lengthen without harming them.
- Try to reach the maximum pain-free range of motion possible for you. Hold the stretch until you feel a little tension but not to the point of pain. The goals are to restore joint mobility and break down residual scar tissue.
- If a particular stretch is too difficult, don't stretch as far as instructed.

## 4. Strength training

After you achieve an acceptable range of motion through stretching – and with your doctor’s OK – it’s time to build strength. Strength training has many benefits. It can:

- Improve your balance and posture by strengthening your core
- Improve your quality of life by making activities easier and more enjoyable
- Protect you from being injured
- Empower you physically and mentally
- Restore strength

Another important reason to do strength training is that chemotherapy can cause weight gain and change your muscle-to-fat ratio. Through strength training, you can gain muscle. Having more muscle will increase your metabolism, which will help you keep your weight at a healthy level. In addition, strength training helps build strong bones. That’s important because many cancer treatments can increase the risk for **osteoporosis** (<http://www.cancer.net/node/29711>), which causes weak and brittle bones.

TAGS:

**exercise** (<http://www.cancer.net/tags/exercise>)   **tips** (<http://www.cancer.net/tags/tips>)   **survivorship** (<http://www.cancer.net/tags/survivorship>)

RELATED RESOURCES:

**8 Steps to Starting Exercise After Cancer Treatment** (<http://www.cancer.net/blog/2016-09/8-steps-starting-exercise-after-cancer-treatment>)

**The Importance of Exercise** (<http://www.cancer.net/blog/2014-03/importance-exercise>)

**Physical Activity Tips for Survivors** (<http://www.cancer.net/survivorship/healthy-living/physical-activity-tips-survivors>)

**Balance Exercises After Cancer Treatment** (<http://www.cancer.net/blog/2016-02/balance-exercises-after-cancer-treatment>)

**Prevention and Healthy Living** (<http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/prevention-and-healthy-living>)