

## Dog sledding offers a healthy dose of adventure for children with cancer

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A young cancer patient bonds with a sled dog as part of an expedition organised by Sourire à la Vie. Credit: Emmanuelle Compte

A team of sled dogs racing through the snowy forests of northern Canada conjures up the timeless spirit of exploration. But the intrepid

youths on the sleds may not be exactly what you're picturing - they're young girls and boys with cancer.

A common perception of the paediatric [cancer](#) patient is of a frail youth whose childhood experiences are tragically curtailed by the disease. Now, the results of a new preliminary study published in *ecancermedicalscience* show that children with cancer may benefit from a different kind of treatment - a healthy dose of adventure.

The study follows eleven children aged 10-18 years, and five chaperones including doctors and nurses, on an expedition organised by the French non-profit Sourire à la Vie, which supports the use of adapted physical activity for young cancer patients.

"What I learned from this study is that we doctors have the false belief that kids with cancer cannot practice sport because they are too tired or weak from their treatments," says corresponding author of the study, Dr Nicolas André. He's a paediatric oncologist at the Assistance Publique Hôpitaux de Marseille, France.

"These perceptions are at least partly wrong," Dr André says. "Adapted physical activities can be performed by most children with cancer even during their treatment, and can bring a lot to children."

All of the eleven children received adapted physical training and exercises before the expedition. The children successfully completed the programme without harm - and they demonstrated statistically significant improvement in both physical and psychological health.

The children participated in other activities, such as snow exercises, as well as caring for the [sled dogs](#).

"One of the main reasons why we chose dog sledding was to create a

unique sportive experience based on change of scenery and building a strong relationship with animals," explains study author Frédéric Sotteau, founder of Sourire à la Vie.

The health and safety of the children was of paramount concern, Sotteau says. "We did not compromise regarding security, so we carefully prepared the expedition hand-in-hand with Canadian associations and doctors."

"Based on our work over the last eight years, we all are convinced that practicing adapted [physical activity](#) is very positive for children with cancer," comments study author Professor Laurent Grélot, a researcher at Aix Marseille University, France. "It avoids cardiovascular and muscular deconditioning, can decrease treatment induced fatigue, and can help maintaining social integration."

"It is now time to demonstrate these results."

Based on the success of this study, the researchers have collected enough funding to initiate a randomised trial to evaluate the benefits of adapted physical activities for children with cancer. But perhaps the best take-home message comes from the [children](#) themselves.

"Before my cancer diagnosis, I used to do a lot of sport, but then I lost self-confidence and my body was not able to cope with physical efforts," says Merwan, an 18-year-old patient. "This trip in Canada transformed me. I am in shape again, and now I know I am able to practice sport again."

"I have been dog sledding for 6 hours a day," adds Nell, a 12-year-old patient. "I am very proud, and I feel so good now."

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