

Research demonstrating the importance of exercise in cancer care

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Northumbria University is researching the impact of exercise on cancer on survivorship. Credit: Northumbria University

Research at Northumbria University, Newcastle is investigating the important role that structured exercise programmes can play in living

with and beyond cancer.

Cancers of the breast, prostate and colon are amongst the most common in western societies. Although [survival rates](#) are increasing, the physical and mental impacts of these cancers and their treatments are long-lasting. Macmillan Cancer Support predicts that support and after care for people with cancer beyond their [initial treatment](#) will cost the NHS at least £1.4 billion every year by 2020.

Led by John Saxton, Professor in Clinical Exercise Physiology and Head of the Department of Sport, Exercise & Rehabilitation at Northumbria, the research is a collaboration with clinical colleagues from NHS Foundation Trusts in the North East, Norwich and Sheffield.

"Physical activity and structured [exercise](#) have an important role to play in alleviating the physiological and psychological impact of cancer and its treatments," said Prof. Saxton.

"Cancer is now considered a chronic condition because more people are living longer after a cancer diagnosis. This research is about using [physical exercise](#) as part of lifestyle interventions to improve the health of people living with and beyond cancer."

Current research is focused on the role of exercise in conjunction with dietary advice in reversing adverse body composition changes—such as increased fat mass and reduced lean body mass—for patients recovering from hormone-receptor positive breast cancer. Newcastle, Gateshead and Northumbria NHS Foundation Trusts are taking part in the North East.

In addition, a large-scale multi-centre trial is investigating how exercise programmes prior to surgery can be used to improve fitness and [treatment](#) outcomes in colorectal cancer patients across the UK, and

includes Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust in the North East. Other work is aimed at developing exercise programmes to alleviate the side-effects of prostate cancer and its treatments.

There are approximately 1100 patients being recruited for the colorectal cancer study and the breast cancer and prostate cancer studies have involved over 100 patients to date.

"We know that common cancers, such as cancers of the breast, prostate and colon can be linked to excess body weight and if patients put weight on after treatment, this can be linked to poorer outcomes," said Prof. Saxton.

"There is a real need to provide sustainable lifestyle support, including regular exercise, healthy eating and maintenance of a healthy body weight. This isn't just about quality of life, as it can also benefit long-term disease outcomes, such as risk of cancer recurrence and the development of cardiometabolic diseases such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular conditions."

While structured exercise interventions will never replace the traditional cancer treatments of chemotherapy, radiotherapy, surgery and hormone treatments, Prof. Saxton is seeing structured [exercise programmes](#) increasingly being used as part of cancer treatment in the NHS. This research is closely aligned with NHS treatment plans and is helping to build a solid evidence-base to support the use of exercise in the holistic management of people living with and beyond [cancer](#).

The research forms part of a recent report by The Physiological Society and GuildHE which looks at the contribution Sport and Exercise Science (SES) makes to UK. The report results show that SES courses added £3.9 billion in income to the UK economy each year.

"Our research was included in the report because it exemplifies the benefits of Sport and Exercise Science to society," said Prof. Saxton.

Provided by Northumbria University

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