

Cancer and exercise during a pandemic

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What options do cancer survivors have during a pandemic when there are limited in-person training options and reduced access to exercise facilities? With National Cancer Survivors Day on June 6, Marina Mourtzakis, a Kinesiology professor who leads Waterloo's Center for Community, Clinical and Applied Research Excellence, examines how to exercise safely as a cancer survivor during or after treatment.

Should cancer survivors be exercising during or after their treatments?

Yes, clinical experts from Cancer Care Ontario, the American College for Sports Medicine, as well as the Canadian Cancer Society recommend exercise both during and following treatment. Exercise is safe for people with [cancer](#). Tailored exercise guidelines for cancer survivors have been developed and implemented worldwide. These guidelines recommend aiming for 20 to 60 minutes of aerobic exercise two to three times per week, along with resistance training of all major muscle groups twice a week, with an emphasis on cancer-specific considerations and safety precautions. With expert guidance, it is entirely possible to achieve these exercise recommendations, either at home or outdoors in a safe and fun way, even when stay-at-home orders are in effect.

What are the benefits of exercise for cancer survivors?

Based on Cancer Care Ontario and the consensus statement from the American College of Sports Medicine, exercise has many benefits for individuals with cancer, including an improved sense of wellness, mental health, sleep, ability to carry out [daily activities](#), bone health, as well as quality of life. It can also reduce the severity of treatment-related symptoms or side-effects such as fatigue, muscle weakness, nausea, depression, lymphedema, decreased immune system function and weight gain or loss. During the restricted access to exercise facilities during the pandemic, it is important to seek out safe, credible remote options to exercise programming for cancer survivors.

With cancer patients being immunocompromised, how can they exercise while remaining safe during the

pandemic?

There are several activities that cancer patients and survivors can do. Some are very similar to what works for the general population, like walking outdoors with a friend, when possible, or exploring your city on a bike. However, there are also specific exercise programs geared to cancer survivors in the community, ones that provide a combination of one-on-one exercise programs guided by clinical exercise physiologists who specialize in this area and create community support. There are several centers across Canada that offer exercise programs for cancer survivors. In the Waterloo-Wellington Region, we offer a unique remote option with individualized exercise prescriptions through the [UW WELL-FIT cancer exercise program](#). Live-stream and pre-recorded classes are offered to cancer survivors so that they can safely participate in fitness programs in the comfort of their own homes.

The important thing is that cancer survivors find activities to do during the pandemic that maintain their health without compromising their safety during treatment and connect them with a supportive community. If an individual is unsure about the best course of action for themselves, they should speak to their cancer physician or oncology clinic nurse, or connect with someone at a specific cancer [exercise program](#) like UW WELL-FIT.

Provided by University of Waterloo

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