Physical activity during chemotherapy and radiotherapy

This leaflet provides information on how to safely participate in physical activity and exercise during chemotherapy and radiotherapy. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact the oncology physiotherapy team on 0207 188 9654 or email active.you@gstt.nhs.uk

During cancer treatment, many people become less active because of the effects of treatment. Being active is a way you can help yourself during and after cancer treatment.

When should I begin?
It is a good idea to start as soon as possible. There are many benefits to being active prior to and during your treatment.

Research has shown that engaging in physical activity helps to manage fatigue, increase muscle strength, joint flexibility and general deconditioning caused by the cancer treatment. It also can maintain and improve the function of your heart, manage your weight and strengthen your bones. Physical activity can also help raise your mood. In some cancers physical activity has been associated with a reduced risk of the cancer spreading.

What can I do during chemotherapy or radiotherapy?
If you are currently inactive, it is recommended that you start with a small amount of low intensity activity and gradually progress to doing something most days of the week. A slow, short walk is a great way to start and you can build up the duration and intensity (e.g. walking faster or adding hills) over time.

If you are currently exercising, we recommend that you continue your activities, however, you may need to change how you are exercising if you are suffering from fatigue or are in pain. Small changes can be made to your exercise plan to allow for any side effects that you experience which are related to your treatment.

Try to do at least 30 minutes of physical activity five days a week. During these 30 minutes, make sure that your pace (your speed or movement) is of a moderate intensity. Moderate intensity means you are slightly breathless, you can hold a conversation, but you don’t have enough breath to sing a song. You don’t need to do 30 minutes all in one go, you can break this activity down into 5 or 10 minutes and build up gradually.
Activities may include walking, vacuuming, mowing the lawn or climbing stairs. You can also include activities like swimming, jogging, dancing, gym work outs or exercise classes. As these exercises tend to be at a more vigorous level (where you are unable to hold a conversation) you only need to do 75 minutes a week. Please also see the specific guidance below.

You should also include activities which strengthens or tones your muscles. This may include lifting weights, Pilates, using resistance bands or yoga. If you are over 65, we recommend that you do two days a week of balance and stretching exercises. If you need some ideas, see the suggested exercises on page 4.

**What is safe to do?**

It is rare that exercise is not recommended. More commonly, small modifications are needed to ensure that it is safe.

The following are common symptoms or conditions that normally indicate you should speak to your doctor or physiotherapist prior for advice.

- Recent surgery. While most surgeons recommend that you return to normal activities of daily living as soon as possible after a cancer surgery, restrictions can apply for up to 12 weeks for returning to exercise or weight training. Check with your surgeon to understand your activity restrictions and how long these apply for.
- Anaemia (low red blood cell count / haemoglobin) or low immune system (neutropenic).
- Unrelieved pain, nausea/vomiting, diarrhoea or any symptoms that cause you concern.

Swimming can be a good activity during treatment. However, if you have a peripheral inserted catheter (PICC) line or a Hickman central line, you cannot swim while this is in place. If you would like to continue to swim during your treatment, please speak to your doctors and nurses to discuss alternatives.

If you would like to swim during radiotherapy, reduce the number of times you swim in chlorinated water as this can have a drying effect on the skin. Make sure you have a shower after swimming to remove excess chlorine. Please discontinue swimming if your skin becomes sore. You can speak to your radiotherapist if you have any other questions about looking after your skin or using moisturisers.

If you are advised that your immune system is low (neutropenic) during your treatment, we recommend that you avoid swimming pools during that period to reduce the risk of picking up an infection.

If you have PEG feeding tube in place you can still swim as long as the area has healed and appears dry. This is generally at least 14 days from when it was inserted.

Strengthening exercises are good during treatment. On page 4 of this leaflet are a few examples of strength exercises you can do at home. However, if you have a PICC line in, we recommend that you do strength exercises under the supervision of the oncology physiotherapy team to reduce the risk of disturbing the function of the PICC line.
Will it make my fatigue worse?
Physical activity is unlikely to make your fatigue worse. In fact, it will help moderate it and even make it better. It is important to note that inactivity can lead to higher levels of fatigue, muscles wasting and reduced function, and it is recommended to try to do something physically active each day. For some, this can initially be as little as 5 – 10 minutes of walking performed multiple times throughout your day. Even small amounts of activity is beneficial, so start with something that you find easy and progress this as your body allows.

Support to be more active after a cancer diagnosis
Being active and staying active can be challenging at times. If you have any questions about doing physical activity, if you have not been active before or if you have any physical limitations due to the cancer or treatment side effects, please contact the oncology physiotherapy team using the contact details below. We can provide support through an assessment of your individual needs, access to physiotherapy lead cancer exercise classes or community exercise, goal setting and support for up to a year.

If you would like to contact us for support or advice, perhaps as your situation has changed, please contact us at the below details.

Contact us
The cancer physiotherapy team at Guy’s and St Thomas’ have a range of expertise that can support symptoms that impact on your physical wellbeing or you becoming more active.

If you have any questions, please contact a member of the oncology physiotherapy team on 020 7188 9654, Monday–Friday, 8.30am to 4.45pm, and leave a message. Or you can email us at Active.you@gstt.nhs.uk

If you have any questions or concerns about the information given in this booklet please contact us, t: 020 7188 9654 or email us, e: Active.you@gstt.nhs.uk

Guy’s and St Thomas’ hospital offers a range of cancer-related information leaflets for patients and carers available at www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/cancer-leaflets.

For information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets.
Example exercises

These exercises are examples of strength exercises. You should aim to do a selection of these exercises twice a week. Each exercise you can do for 8-12 repetitions. If you would like to progress your exercises, aim to complete 2-4 sets of each exercise.

Lunges
- Start in a standing position and use support if required.
- Take a large step forward and slowly bend your knees- try not to wobble or shake.
- Slowly return to your starting position.
To progress:
- Carry weights in each hand.

Stand on your toes
- Use support if required.
- Go up onto your toes.
To progress:
- Hold each lift for up to 5 seconds.
- Wear an ankle weight.

Arm curls
- Bend and straighten your arm.
To progress:
- Introduce a light weight and gradually increase.

Marching
- Using support if required, march on the spot raising your knees high.
To progress:
- Wear ankle weights attached to your ankles.

Bridging
- Lie on your back, bend your knees and cross your arms across your chest.
- Lift your bottom up and down slowly. Avoid shaking.
To progress:
- With your bottom raised, lift one leg up and then slowly lower without shaking.

Wall push ups
- Face the wall with elbows straight and arms at shoulder height.
- Do push ups against the wall keeping your body in a straight line.

Sit to stand
- Stand up and sit down using your hand(s) as required.
- Do as many as you can in a minute.
To progress:
- Cross your arms across your chest.

Step ups
- Climb one or two stairs or a flight of stairs quickly holding onto a rail if required.
To progress:
- Increase the speed and the amount of stairs.
Useful sources of information

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline
If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.
\textbf{t:} 020 7188 8748, Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm

Your comments and concerns
For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.
\textbf{t:} 020 7188 8801 (PALS) \hspace{1cm} \textbf{e:} pals@gstt.nhs.uk
\textbf{t:} 020 7188 3514 (complaints) \hspace{1cm} \textbf{e:} complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language and accessible support services
If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch.
\textbf{t:} 020 7188 8815 \hspace{1cm} \textbf{e:} languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS 111
Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.
\textbf{t:} 111 \hspace{1cm} \textbf{w:} 111.nhs.uk

NHS website
Online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you take control of your health and wellbeing.
\textbf{w:} www.nhs.uk

Get involved and have your say: become a member of the Trust
Members of Guy’s and St Thomas’ NHS Foundation Trust contribute to the organisation on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it is up to you how much you get involved. To find out more, please get in touch.
\textbf{t:} 0800 731 0319 \hspace{1cm} \textbf{e:} members@gstt.nhs.uk \hspace{1cm} \textbf{w:} www.guysandsthomas.nhs.uk/membership

Was this leaflet useful?
We want to make sure the information you receive is helpful to you. If you have any comments about this leaflet, we would be happy to hear from you, fill in our simple online form, \textbf{w:} www.guysandsthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets, or \textbf{e:} patientinformationteam@gstt.nhs.uk