



Survivorship care in general practice: supporting patients to live well

This resource provides guidance for general practice when caring for people who have finished treatments for cancer.

Between 1982–1987 and 2006–2010, five-year survival from all cancers combined increased from 47% to 66% (1). With cancer survival increasing, more people are in need of health care following cancer treatment.

Cancer survivors can face many challenges as a result of their cancer diagnosis and treatment. General practice has an important role in caring for cancer survivors.

Research shows that 1 in 3 preventable cancers are caused by six lifestyle behaviours: smoking, UV radiation, poor diet, overweight, alcohol and inadequate daily physical activity (2). Other preventable cancers include cancers related to infections such as hepatitis B and HPV.

General practice and care of cancer survivors

Cancer survivors may experience a range of effects from cancer and its treatment, including emotional, physical, psychosocial and financial effects.

Survivors may be at increased risk of cancer recurrence; secondary cancers; functional impairment; fatigue; chronic diseases such as osteoporosis, heart disease and type 2 diabetes; weight gain; and death from non-cancer causes (3).

Obesity can contribute to morbidity from cancer treatment and the development of comorbid illness. In addition, obesity poses a risk for developing second primary malignancies.

Many of these risks may be reduced through lifestyle interventions. General practitioners and other practice staff are well placed to promote lifestyle interventions to cancer survivors.

General practice care may include managing comorbid illness and considering strategies to reduce the risk of cancer recurrence and improve overall health and quality of life. Suitable approaches may include screening for cancer and non-cancerous conditions, managing health risks and immunisation.

Healthy lifestyle recommendations

Cancer Council Australia (3) recommends that cancer survivors:

- maintain a healthy body weight – body mass index (BMI) between 18.5 and 25 kg/m²
- be physically active – aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate activity daily
- eat more vegetables and fruit – aim for two serves of fruit and five serves of vegetables a day
- limit alcohol – no more than two standard drinks a day.

These recommendations are consistent with recommendations to reduce the risk of cancer and with national recommendations to promote general health.

Exercise regularly

Physical activity and resistance exercise are important for healthy living and have been shown to have important benefits for cancer survivors (4). Many cancer survivors are able to slowly increase exercise time and intensity.

Cancer Council Australia (3) recommends exercise during and after cancer treatment to:

- reduce anxiety and fatigue
- improve self-esteem
- increase feelings of optimism
- improve heart health
- maintain a healthy weight
- boost muscle

Physical activity may lower the risk of cancer recurrence by preventing obesity, reducing inflammation and hormone levels, and improving insulin resistance and immune system function (5).

Cancer-related fatigue is a common problem for cancer patients and is a side effect of treatment that often worsens during treatment and can persist as a long-term concern for many patients. There is high-quality evidence that increasing physical activity is associated with a reduction in fatigue. See our fact sheet. https://www.petermac.org/sites/default/files/media-uploads/ACSC_HP_FactSheet_FU_Fatigue_WEB.pdf

Key messages

- Between 1982 and 2010, five-year cancer survival rates increased from 47% to 66%.
- There is growing evidence that weight management and physical activity can improve the quality of life of cancer survivors, reduce the risk of cancer recurrence and extend survival.
- General practice has an important and growing role in addressing the needs of cancer survivors.



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As a result of both their cancer and treatment, cancer patients are often in a deconditioned state. Proven benefits of exercise for cancer survivors include improved cardiopulmonary fitness, muscle strength and body composition (3).

Australia's physical activity and sedentary behaviour guidelines (6) recommend that people:

- be active (any physical activity is better than none)
- accumulate 150 to 300 minutes (2½ to 5 hours) of moderate intensity physical activity or 75 to 150 minutes (1¼ to 2½ hours) of vigorous intensity physical activity, or an equivalent combination of both moderate and vigorous activities, each week
- be active on most, preferably all, days every week
- do muscle strengthening activities on at least two days each week
- minimise the amount of time spent in prolonged sitting
- break up long periods of sitting as often as possible.

Have a healthy diet and limit alcohol

Choosing a diet of fresh fruits and vegetables and other unprocessed, low-fat foods helps survivors to regain strength after treatment and reduce the risks of illnesses such as heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity and diabetes. There is increasing evidence that being overweight increases the risk of cancer recurrence and that intentional weight loss (for those who are overweight or obese) has health-related benefits (4).

The types of foods recommended to help prevent cancer are the same ones that protect against cancer recurrence. Fruit and vegetables are recommended as an important source of nutrients (vitamins, minerals, phytochemicals and fibre) that may have a cancer-protective effect. In addition, these foods promote satiety and thus may promote healthy weight management.

Australian dietary guidelines (7) recommend that people:

- achieve and maintain a healthy weight [by being] physically active and choosing amounts of nutritious food and drinks to meet energy needs
- enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods from five groups every day: vegetables and legumes; fruit; grains; lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds and legumes/beans; and dairy (milk, yoghurt and cheese) and/or non-dairy alternatives

- limit intake of foods containing saturated fat, added salt, added sugars and alcohol
- prepare and store food safely.

Alcohol use has been identified as a risk factor for several primary cancers, including mouth, throat, larynx, oesophagus, liver, breast, and rectum and colon (4, 8). Alcohol increases risk of recurrence of some cancers. In people who have already been diagnosed with cancer, alcohol intake could affect the risk for these new cancers. It is important to tailor advice on alcohol consumption to the individual cancer survivor.

Resources

This information sheet is part of a series designed for health professionals. Review the rest of the series on our website: <https://www.petermac.org/services/support-services/australian-cancer-survivorship-centre/health-professionals/resources>

If you have a passion for cancer survivorship, contact us to join our online collaborative workspace: contactacsc@petermac.org

If you are a cancer survivor please also see our matching series written specifically for you: <https://www.petermac.org/services/support-services/australian-cancer-survivorship-centre/cancer-survivors>

Further resources for cancer survivors

Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre, Practical ways of coping with cancer, <https://www.petermac.org/services/cancer-information-resources/coping-cancer-emotions-side-effects>

Cancer Council Victoria, Healthy living after cancer program, <http://www.cancerciv.org.au/how-we-can-help/healthy-living-after-cancer>

Cancer Council Victoria, Nutrition, <http://www.cancerciv.org.au/living-with-cancer/diet-nutrition>

Cancer Council Victoria, Exercise tips for those with cancer, <http://www.cancerciv.org.au/living-with-cancer/exercise/getting-started>

Acknowledgement

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Further information

This overview was prepared with reference to:

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2. Whiteman, D. et al. Cancers in Australia in 2010 attributable to modifiable factors: introduction and overview. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health. 2015;39:403–7.
3. Cancer Council Australia. Position statement – Benefits of healthy diet and physical activity for cancer survivors. 2016. http://wiki.cancer.org.au/policy/Position_statement_-_Benefits_of_healthy_diet_and_physical_activity_for_cancer_survivors.
4. Rock CL, Doyle C, Demark-Wahnefried W, et al. Nutrition and physical activity guidelines for cancer survivors. CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians. 2012;62(4):243–74.
5. Denmark-Wahnefried, W. et al. Practical clinical interventions for diet, physical activity, and weight control in cancer survivors. CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians. 2015;65:167–89.
6. Australian Government Department of Health. Australia's Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines for Adults. 2014. <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/health-pubhlth-strateg-phys-act-guidelines>.
7. National Health and Medical Research Council. Australian Dietary Guidelines. 2013. <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines-publications/n55>.
8. American Cancer Society. Alcohol use and cancer. 2014. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/causes/dietandphysicalactivity/alcohol-use-and-cancer>

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