

Cancer and Exercise

By Kent Pegg

Cancer is one of the major killers of Americans today. Each year, over one-half million Americans die of cancer, with lung cancer, prostate or breast cancer, and colorectal cancer claiming the most victims. In 1997, the National Center for Health Statistics stated that the lifetime risk for developing cancer for women was 38% and for men a staggering 48%.

Despite the numerous genetic and environmental causes of cancer and its affect on so many American's lives, there are some things you can do to limit your risk of cancer and to reduce its impact if you have cancer.

Regular cancer screenings, proper diet and nutritional habits, and regular exercise have all been shown to be beneficial methods for fighting cancer.

The American Cancer Society reports that over half of all new cancer cases occur in areas of the body where screenings can be conducted. They estimate that if all Americans underwent regular screenings the survival rates for these cancers could be as high as 95%.

Proper nutrition is also important in cancer prevention. The National Center for Health Statistics report that 33% of all cancers are caused by poor nutrition.

To help reduce your risk of cancer from poor nutrition, the American Cancer Society recommends that most food choices should come from plant sources. Consume low-fat, high-fiber foods including plenty of whole grains and fruits and vegetables.

Also, limit your intake of high-fat foods, especially those that come from animal sources. Reducing the amount of high-fat meat and dairy products you eat can help reduce your risk of cancer.

If you drink, the Society suggests that you should limit your consumption of all alcoholic beverages. Some studies have shown that there is an association between alcohol consumption and an increased risk of breast cancer.

Exercise is another key component in the fight against cancer. While more research is necessary to determine just how effective exercise can be in helping to prevent cancer, there is growing evidence that regular exercise is beneficial.

Research has shown that exercise retards cancer growth at several different sites. Also, exercise can help fight cancer through enhancing the activity of some cells in the immune system like natural killer cells (white blood cells that kill certain types of cancers), cytotoxic T cells and macrophages.

In 1997, the American Institute for Cancer Research reported that a panel of cancer experts determined that 30% to 40% of cancer could be prevented "if people ate a healthy diet, avoided obesity and participated in an adequate amount of exercise." They recommended that people exercise briskly for one hour per day and vigorously for at least one hour per week if they had sedentary occupations.

In addition to helping to prevent cancer, exercise can be beneficial to those who have, or have had, cancer. Exercise elevates mood, stimulates appetite, and helps prevent the loss of muscle tissue.

Fatigue, loss of muscle mass and weakness are symptoms reported by many cancer patients. Often these problems lead to reduced physical activity, compounding the problem and creating a further downward spiral.

Cancer patients should always check with their physicians before beginning or changing their exercise routines. Remember that each case is unique and there may be specific exercises that should or should not be performed.

In general, cancer patients undergoing treatment should focus on light exercise to maintain strength and endurance, and to try to increase their level of function. Cancer survivors in remission or after cure should seek exercises that will return them to their former level of physical fitness.

For all cancer patients, an exercise program should include the three basic components of physical fitness: cardio endurance, muscle strengthening, and flexibility.

Cardiovascular exercise should begin lightly with walking on a treadmill or riding a recumbent bike and increase gradually as physical conditioning allows.

A weight-training program for muscle strength should include exercises for every major muscle group including your chest, back, shoulders, biceps, triceps, abdominals, and legs.

Flexibility training can be achieved through stretching exercises or by taking a stretching or yoga class.

Consult your physician to determine exercise intensity and duration, as extremely vigorous or prolonged exercise is not right for every person.

Whether you're trying to prevent cancer or recovering from it, consider improving your level of physical conditioning. Proper fitness could be one of the keys to keeping your body cancer free.

Kent Pegg is a certified personal trainer and the co-owner of the Los Alamos Fitness Center. If you have any questions about the information in this article you can call him at 662-5232.