

Information for  
patients & families

# Staying active during cancer treatment in the hospital and at home



Symptom Management



Cancer Care  
Alberta

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## Why staying active matters

Staying active during your hospital stay can help you maintain your strength, energy and independence. Even small amounts of movement throughout the day can make a difference.

Staying active can help:

- Keep your muscles and bones strong.
- Make daily activities easier.
- Reduce stiffness and help you stay mobile.
- Improve your energy and mood.
- Keep your lungs clear.
- Reduce swelling.
- Help you maintain your independence.



Everyone starts at a different level. You might have been very active before coming to hospital, or you might feel weaker because of your illness or treatment.

Do what you can based on how you feel.

Your physiotherapist or healthcare team can help you decide what is safe and right for you. The information and exercises in this booklet provide general guidance. Your healthcare team may recommend different activities or exercises based on your needs.

Staying as active as you are able each day can help keep your body moving, keep your lungs clear and prevent problems caused by spending too much time in bed.

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## Special precautions

Cancer treatment can affect your energy, strength and blood counts. Your healthcare team will let you know what types of activity are safe for you.

### Before you start

- Your healthcare team will consider your blood counts and other test results when deciding what activities are safe for you.
- If you feel feverish or have shaking chills, tell your nurse or healthcare team right away.
- If you feel unsteady, ask for help before getting up.

### During your hospital stay

- Be careful around your lines, tubes and equipment, such as central lines, IV tubing and IV poles. Avoid pulling or tugging on them.
- Move slowly and safely. Do not force any movement.
- Wear supportive, non-slip footwear.
- Only do strengthening exercises if your healthcare team says they are safe for you.
- Avoid high-intensity activity or activities that involve heavy lifting.

If you have bone (lytic) lesions, you may need additional precautions or restrictions. Ask your healthcare team what is safe for you.

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## Stop and tell your healthcare team right away if you:

- Feel dizzy or lightheaded.
- Have new or worsening shortness of breath.
- Feel very tired or unwell.
- Have chest pain.
- Have a racing or irregular heartbeat.



Follow your healthcare team's guidance when doing these activities and exercises.



## Staying active during your hospital stay

It is easy to spend a lot of time in bed when you are in hospital. Try to get up and move throughout the day when you can. Small amounts of movement add up.

Your activity may change from day to day. It is normal to feel more tired or weaker than usual. Do what feels manageable for you and rest when you need to.

### Daily activities

Keep doing your daily activities as much as you can:

- Get dressed each day.
- Sit in a chair for meals.
- Sit up during the day.
- Do your mouth care.
- Wash your face at the sink.
- Walk to the bathroom or in the hallway when it is safe.
- Get water from the kitchen.
- Make your bed.

When you can, use your bed mainly for rest and sleep. To help you stay active:

- Try not to stay in one position for too long.
- Sit up and change positions regularly.
- Move around as much as you comfortably can.

Changing positions often can help reduce pressure on your skin and help prevent sore areas from developing.

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## Walking

Walking is one of the most important ways to stay active during your hospital stay. Even short walks can help maintain your strength, keep your lungs clear and support your recovery.

- Try to get up and move several times each day.
- When it is safe, walk in the hallway several times a day.
- If you need to walk with an IV pole, be careful around your lines, tubing and other attachments.
- If you feel unsteady or need help walking, ask for help before you get up.
- Your healthcare team can help you decide what is safe and provide a walking aid, such as a walker, if needed.
- The amount you walk may change from day to day. Do what feels manageable for you.

## Posture

Sitting or standing up straight helps your lungs expand, keeps your muscles strong and can improve how you feel.

- Try to sit or stand upright several times a day.
- Keep your shoulders relaxed and not rounded forward.
- Change positions often and avoid staying in one position for too long.



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## Deep breathing exercises

Deep breathing helps your lungs expand and might help reduce your risk of lung infections.

1. Sit, stand or lie in a comfortable position.
2. Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose. Try to let your belly and ribs expand.
3. Hold for a few seconds, then breathe out slowly through your mouth.
4. Repeat this multiple times throughout the day.



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Any type of slow, deep breathing can help. You may also be given an incentive spirometer (a breathing device) to help you practice taking slow, deep breaths.

## Ankle pumps

You can do these exercises sitting or lying down in bed. These exercises help with blood flow in your legs.

1. Move your feet up and down to flex and relax your calf muscles.
2. Repeat 10 times every hour if you are awake and not otherwise active.



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## Getting started with gentle activity

Walking, changing positions, sitting or standing upright, deep breathing and ankle pumps are simple ways to stay active during your hospital stay. Try to include these activities throughout the day, even when your energy is low.

Your energy and strength may change from day to day. On days when you feel well, you may be able to do more. On days when you feel more tired or unwell, it is okay to do less. Your activity does not need to increase every day.

The exercises in the next section can be added in when you feel able. Your physiotherapist or healthcare team can help you decide which activities and exercises are right for you based on how you are feeling and your current needs.

The goal is to stay as active as you can safely manage each day — not to push yourself when you are tired or unwell.



## Exercises

Try the exercises that feel safe and manageable for you. It may help to do them earlier in the day, before you become more tired or weak. Your healthcare team can help you decide what is safe.

- Start with 5 to 10 repetitions unless otherwise directed.
- Increase to 10 repetitions or add a second set if you feel able.
- Repeat each exercise on both sides when needed (for example, both arms or both legs).
- Your muscles should feel tired, but not painful.
- Stop if you cannot keep good form.

### Level 1: Lying down exercises

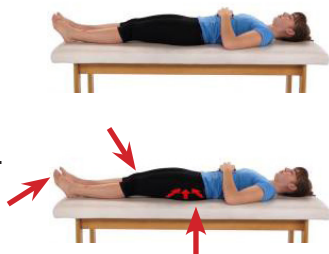
Level 1 exercises are done while lying down. They are a good place to start when you are feeling weak or tired.

#### Lying on a flat bed

Make sure your bed is firm and flat. If you are in a hospital, adjust the bed settings to make the mattress as firm as possible. Ask your healthcare team for help if needed.

#### Leg squeezes

1. Lie on your back. Tighten your buttocks, push your knees flat against the bed and flex your toes toward your nose.
2. Hold for 5 seconds, then relax.



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## Heel slides

1. Lie on your back with your legs straight.
2. Slowly slide one heel toward your buttocks by bending your knee.
3. Slowly slide your heel back until your leg is straight.



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## Bridging

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat.
2. Lift your hips up slowly.
3. Hold, then slowly lower your hips back down.

Stop if you feel pain in your back.



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## Side-lying clamshells

1. Lie on your side with your hips and knees bent. Keep your feet together.
2. Lift your top knee up. Keep your feet together.
3. Hold for 3 to 5 seconds, then lower your knee.



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## Quads over roll

1. Lie on your back with one knee bent. Place a rolled towel under the knee of your other leg.
2. Keep your knee resting on the towel and lift your heel to straighten your leg.
3. Hold for 3 seconds.
4. Slowly lower your heel back down.



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## Straight leg raise

1. Lie on your back with one knee bent and one leg straight. Keep your lower back flat on the bed.
2. Tighten the muscles in your straight leg and point your toes toward the ceiling.
3. Lift your leg off the bed. Hold for a few seconds.
4. Lower your leg slowly back down.



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## Arm raise

1. Lie on your back.
2. Breathe in as you lift one arm up over your head, as far as is comfortable.
3. Lower your arm as you breathe out.



Switch arms and repeat.

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Only lift your arm as far as is comfortable, especially if you have a central line or feel tenderness.

## Whole body stretch

1. Lie flat on your back.
2. Reach your arms over your head.
3. Stretch your legs in the opposite direction.
4. Hold for 5 seconds while breathing.
5. Relax.



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## Level 2: Sitting and standing exercises

### Sitting

Before you start the sitting exercises:

- Sit in a chair or at the edge of your bed with your feet flat on the floor.
- Sit up tall with your back supported if possible.
- Relax your shoulders and keep your head level.

#### Arm raises

1. Sit tall in your chair with your arms resting at your sides.
2. Breathe in as you slowly raise both arms out to the sides and up, as high as is comfortable.
3. Slowly lower your arms as you breathe out.

If needed, raise one arm at a time.



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#### Knee straightening with ankle pump

1. Sit tall in your chair.
2. Lift one foot off the floor and straighten your knee.
3. Keeping your leg straight, bring your toes toward you, then point them away from you. Repeat 5 times.
4. Slowly lower your foot back down.

Repeat with your other leg.



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## Chair dips

1. Sit near the edge of a sturdy chair with armrests.
2. Place your hands on the armrests beside you.
3. Push down through your arms to lift your body slightly off the chair. Use your legs to help.
4. Slowly lower yourself back onto the chair.



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## Seated marching

1. Sit tall in your chair.
2. Lift one knee toward your chest as high as is comfortable.
3. Lower your foot back to the floor.



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## Seated heel raises

1. Sit tall in your chair with both feet flat on the floor.
2. Keep your toes on the floor and lift your heels up.
3. Hold for a few seconds.
4. Lower your heels back down slowly.



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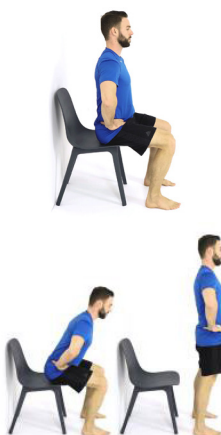
## Standing

- Try these when you feel stronger and steady on your feet.
- Use a sturdy chair, counter or the end of the bed for support during all standing exercises.
- Ask for help if you feel unsteady.
- Stand tall with your feet hip-width apart.
- Keep your shoulders relaxed and look straight ahead.

### Sit-to-stand

1. Sit near the front of a chair or bed.
2. Lean forward slightly and stand up. Use your hands for support if needed.
3. Slowly sit back down.

Using the armrests or changing the height of the chair or surface may make this exercise easier or harder.



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### Calf raise

1. Stand with your feet hip-width apart.
2. Hold a chair or counter for support.
3. Lift your heels off the floor.
4. Lower your heels back down slowly.



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## Hip abduction

1. Stand with your feet slightly apart.
2. Hold a chair, counter or bed for support.
3. Lift one leg out to the side. Keep your toes facing forward.
4. Lower your leg slowly.

Complete one side, then switch sides.



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## Hip extension

1. Stand with your feet slightly apart.
2. Hold a chair, counter or bed for support.
3. Keep your leg straight and move it backward.
4. Squeeze your buttocks.
5. Slowly return your leg to the starting position.

Complete one side, then switch sides.



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## Wall push-up

1. Stand facing a wall, about one step away.
2. Place your hands on the wall at shoulder height.
3. Bend your elbows and bring your chest toward the wall.
4. Push back to the starting position by straightening your arms.

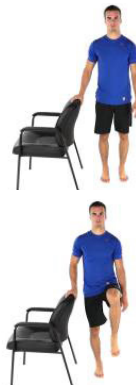
Keep your body straight.



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## Standing march

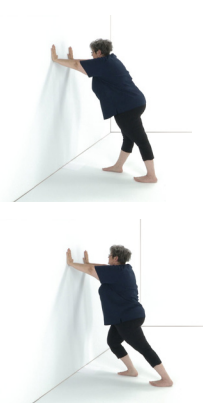
1. Stand tall and hold a chair or counter for support.
2. Lift one knee up.
3. Lower it down, then lift the other knee.
4. Continue marching in place, alternating legs.



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## Standing calf stretch

1. Stand facing a wall. Place your hands on the wall.
2. Step one foot back. Keep your back leg straight and heel on the floor.
3. Bend your front knee until you feel a stretch in your back leg.
4. Hold for 10 to 20 seconds, then relax.



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## Managing your energy

It is normal to feel tired during treatment and when you first go home. Try to:

- Take breaks and rest when you need to.
- Spread activities throughout the day.
- Sit down for tasks when you can.
- Do the most important activities when you have the most energy.



For more information, read the [Managing cancer-related fatigue](#) booklet at your cancer centre, scan the QR code with your smartphone or visit [bit.ly/cancerfatiguebook](https://bit.ly/cancerfatiguebook)



## Progressing your exercises at home

Continue doing the exercises you did in the hospital when you get home. Slowly increase your activity as you feel able.

Talk to your doctor or healthcare team before trying new activities or more vigorous exercise. You may be ready to do more if your blood counts are better and your team says it is safe.

Try to include different types of activity:

- Endurance (like walking)
- Strength (lifting weights, resistance exercises)
- Flexibility (stretching)

Avoid public gyms or crowded exercise spaces until your healthcare team says it is safe. These places may increase your risk of infection.

### Endurance exercises

Endurance activities help your heart and lungs and give you more energy. Examples include walking, biking or dancing.

Start with a short period of activity, like 5 to 10 minutes. Slowly increase your time as you feel able. Try to slowly build up to about 30 minutes most days of the week.

Aim for a moderate level of activity.

You should be able to talk while exercising, but not sing. Take breaks when you need to.



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## Strengthening exercises

Doing strengthening exercises 2 to 4 times a week helps keep your muscles and bones strong.

Examples include:

- Lifting and carrying items
- Pushing and pulling
- Simple resistance exercises

You can work up to 10 repetitions and add more sets as you feel able.

Your muscles should feel tired, but not painful. Stop if you feel pain or cannot keep good form.

If you have bone problems, check with your doctor before using weights or resistance bands.

## Flexibility exercises

These exercises help keep your joints moving well.

Examples include:

- Stretching
- Yoga
- Tai Chi

Stretch gently  
and do not  
push into pain.

Try to do these exercises most days of the week.

It is best to stretch after activity, when your muscles are warm.

## Tracking your activity

You may find it helpful to keep track of your activity. You can use a notebook, your phone or a calendar.

Each day, write down:

- What activity you did (for example, walking).
- How long you were active.
- How you felt (for example, good, tired, very tired).

You can also write down any symptoms or concerns.

There is no right or wrong way to do this. Do what works best for you.

## 3-minute exercise videos

Some people prefer to exercise by following along with a video. Follow any precautions given to you by your healthcare team.

Scan the QR code with your smartphone or visit [bit.ly/cancer-exercise](https://bit.ly/cancer-exercise)



## Learn more

The Alberta Cancer Exercise (ACE) Program offers free exercise programs designed for people living with or recovering from cancer. Scan the QR code with your smartphone or visit [bit.ly/albertacancerexercise](https://bit.ly/albertacancerexercise)



For additional tips and resources about cancer and exercise, see the [Cancer and Exercise](#) leaflet at your cancer centre or visit [bit.ly/ccExercise](https://bit.ly/ccExercise)



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## Important things to remember:



Stay active as you are able each day.



Stop if something hurts or does not feel right.



Contact your healthcare team if you are unsure.

For other Cancer Care Alberta  
resources, visit

[cancercarealberta.ca](https://cancercarealberta.ca)

