

Physical Activity and Cancer Risk



This information sheet is about how physical activity influences your cancer risk. It is based on research evidence and has been written for the general public.

Key Messages

Being physically active on most days is an important part of being healthy. Many people know that being active helps prevent heart disease, diabetes, stroke and weight gain, but they do not always realise it is also important for reducing cancer risk.

Daily physical activity can reduce the risk of bowel cancer and may also lower the risk of breast, endometrial, lung, pancreatic and prostate cancers.

Being physically active is an important part of managing a healthy weight and losing excess weight. Being overweight and/or obese can increase the risk of cancers of the oesophagus, pancreas, gallbladder, colon, breast (postmenopausal), endometrium and kidney.

How much physical activity do I need to do?

New Zealand has guidelines on physical activity, for children and young people and another for adults. These guidelines are focused on general health benefits.

The New Zealand Physical Activity Guidelines for Children and Young People (Aged 2-18 years) recommend:

- throughout each day, do 60 minutes or more of moderate to vigorous activity
- be active in as many ways as possible; for example through play, cultural activities,

dance, sport and recreation, jobs and going from place to place

- be active with friends and whanau, at home, school, and in the community
- spend less than 2 hours a day (out of school time) in front of television, computers and game consoles.

The New Zealand Physical Activity Guidelines for Adults recommend:

- think of movement as an opportunity, not an inconvenience
- be active every day in as many ways as you can
- put together at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity (like brisk walking) on most, if not every day of the week. This can be achieved by doing three 10-minute sessions in a day.
- do some regular vigorous exercise, if possible, for added health and fitness.

For Cancer Protection

For cancer prevention the scientific evidence suggests the more physical activity you do the better and that 30 minutes a day is not enough.

Recent research suggests you need to do **60 minutes or more of moderate activity or 30 minutes of vigorous activity every day.**

Moderate intensity activity causes a “slight but noticeable increase in breathing and heart rate”. It

includes brisk walking, mowing the lawn, digging in the garden, medium-paced swimming or cycling.

Vigorous activity makes you “huff and puff” and includes active sports such as football, squash, netball and basketball, and activities such as aerobics, circuit training, jogging, fast cycling or brisk rowing.

While the research does not relate to cancer prevention in children it is important to encourage children to learn to be active so it becomes the normal thing for them to do and a habit they continue into adulthood.

Getting Started

If you are not already active or you do less exercise than is recommended this try to work up to getting more physical activity by increasing the amount you do a little each day and each week. If you are not active any increase will be beneficial.

Start by walking. It is good exercise and you can gradually increase your speed and the distance you go as you get fitter. Make it part of your normal daily activities by walking instead of using the car to go places or to run errands. The only equipment you need is comfortable shoes and clothes.

If you have a medical condition or are unsure about your health ask for your doctor’s advice before doing any vigorous activity.

Tips on being more active

Choose activities you enjoy and that fit into your normal routine and family life as this makes it more likely that you will keep the activity going. Being active as a couple, a family, or with friends is helpful to keep motivated to continue. Try family games, dancing, bush walks or family bike rides.

Being more active is not just about leisure time. Try to do your daily chores in a more active way and look for opportunities to move in everything you do.

Hunt and gather:

- Go for a brisk walk at lunchtime, buy your lunch from a shop several blocks away rather than the one next door

Multitask:

- Pace while you are talking on the phone
- While watching television try stretching and moving rather than sitting still and get up and move during the ads. Dance to the ad music!
- Look for ways to be more vigorous doing chores like vacuuming, mowing the lawn, cleaning the car, doing the garden.

Make the active choice:

- Take to stairs instead of the lift or escalator
- Get off the bus/train one stop before your destination or park some distance from where you want to go and walk the rest of the way.
- ‘Walk and talk’ rather than sending an email or making a phone call whenever possible

Get social:

- Play active games with your children/grandchildren
- Join a dance class, walking group, social sports team
- Start a walking group with friends
- Meet friends for a walk or an exercise class at a gym rather than a coffee or drink

Get a gadget:

- Get a pedometer to measure how many steps you do in a day and as an incentive to get you moving. Aim to increase the number of steps each day.