

Handout: Walking with Hope

Dear Patient,

We “prescribed” daily walks to help optimize your course of treatment. You’ll find answers to common questions and tips for staying motivated, especially on days you feel tired.

How important is exercise while in treatment?

Very important. Walking is an aerobic exercise that increases oxygen throughout your body, helping enable your cells and organs to function as well as possible while in treatment. Walking matters!

How much walking is enough?

Our goal is two 10-minute sessions a day where you walk as quickly as you can while still talking comfortably. More is fine, too.

How does walking help physical recovery?

Cancer and treatment cause physical changes that make your body work harder just to maintain normal function. To help your body handle the added physical stress, walking causes changes that help build resilience, including:

- Strengthening your heart and lungs.
- Reducing inflammation.
- Keeping your muscles conditioned.

Regular walking also helps recovery by decreasing some side effects. *Feeling* better helps you *get* better when it improves your ability to eat, sleep, and stay involved in daily life. In some cases, exercise helps increase the effectiveness of cancer treatment through its beneficial effects on the body, such as improved circulation.

How does spending all day in a chair or bed affect my recovery?

Whether sick or 100% healthy, sitting or lying all day causes:

- Fatigue
- Loss of bone mass and muscle mass
- Poor circulation, which increases the risk of blood clots
- Impaired gut function; constipation
- Hormone changes
- Low blood pressure (causing lightheadedness on standing)

Preventing those predictable changes is especially important when receiving treatment that causes any of those same problems.

How might regular walks help emotionally?

While undergoing cancer treatments, moderate aerobic activity can reduce anxiety and depressive symptoms. In addition to affecting brain chemistry positively, exercise-related physical changes may improve mood through...

- Reduced side effects.
- Improved eating, sleeping, daily functioning.
- Feeling increased control by actively promoting health.
- An escape from illness while enjoying your surroundings outdoors (weather permitting), in hallways, or at indoor malls.

What if you develop symptoms while walking?

Exercise is safe for most cancer survivors. That said, if you develop symptoms (e.g., chest pain, shortness of breath, increased nausea, swelling) during or after your walks, **stop your walks, and call the office.** Walking serves as an early warning system. If symptoms are due to an issue needing medical attention, the problem may be easier to treat than if picked up later.

What if you feel too tired to walk?

A natural response to tiredness is to rest more. Here are the facts: (1) exercise helps lessen fatigue during cancer treatment and

(2) sitting and/or lying all day worsens fatigue. Please remind yourself of those facts if your body says “No, no, no!” to walking or if friends and family encourage you to rest more instead of walking.

Why might walking feel like a burden?

It’s not easy gearing up to walk while queasy, fatigued, guarding fresh incisions, grieving, feeling down, or dealing with other effects of illness. Also, you are making sacrifices to complete all your appointments and comply with instructions in-between those visits. Taking walks may feel like another “treatment”—one you are tempted to skip because doing so doesn’t carry the same grave consequences as missing cancer treatments. Even if highly motivated, you may wonder where you can find the time in the busy-ness of cancer treatment.

For patients who can’t move around as easily as before, some avoid walking to avoid seeing themselves as weaker or slower. They don’t like the feelings (sadness, vulnerability, and powerlessness) that arise when they first try walking, so they don’t stick with it.

Lastly, no medicine can do for your body what walking can do, and nobody can walk for you. If your tank feels emptied by all the treatments and stress, how do you muster the willpower and discipline to walk?

What are motivational tips?

Start with baby steps: Take a one-minute walk. Gradually build up to two 10-minute walks per day, with at least one of those walks in the morning if possible. If you have a rough day or skip a day, that’s okay. Start again in the morning. Other measures include:

- *Finding a walking buddy.*
- *Listening to music or talk shows while walking.*
- *Rewarding yourself after every ten walks.*
- *Envisioning resuming activities after your recovery, which walking helped happen as quickly as possible.*
- *Using self-talk to remind yourself: Aerobic exercise is essential for optimizing the outcome; Walking helps you feel better overall; Walking is under your control.*

Cancer treatments challenge your body until you cross the finish line. Just as athletes in better condition endure the stresses of competition better, patients in better condition endure the stresses of cancer and its treatment better.

Are other forms of exercise acceptable?

Yes. Anything that gets you moving helps your resilience. In addition to aerobic exercise (such as walking), strengthening exercises (such as weights and stretch bands) twice a week offer additional benefits. **Please check with us before starting an exercise program other than walking.** Certain activities must be avoided during cancer treatment, such as swimming while your immune system is low.

To learn more, check out *Moving Through Cancer. An Exercise and Strength Training Program for the Fight of Your Life* (Schmitz; Chronicle Prism; 2021) and/or consult your hospital’s Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation department and/or your local Cancer Support Organizations.

How is walking linked to hope?

Our prescription for you to walk is an act of hope. It reflects our hope for you doing as well as possible during treatment and getting through treatment to a better tomorrow.

Your walks are acts of hope. More than just saying, *I have hope*, each step you take demonstrates a belief in your power to influence your outcome positively. By walking regularly, including on days you don’t want to, you nurture hope of a better tomorrow. **OT**



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