

# Stress Reduction and Cancer

## A Beginner's Guide



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Everyone knows cancer is stressful, both on the survivor and their loved ones.

Whether it's due to uncertainty regarding the future, upcoming procedures, financing treatments, possible recurrence, or simply the toll it's taking on family and loved ones, there is a lot about a cancer diagnosis that's stressful. While it is impossible to make stress go away entirely, there are methods supported by research to decrease stress, including in the cancer population specifically. These include exercise, gentle yoga, managing work-life balance, or simply taking five minutes out of your day to be mindful. Reducing the effect of stress may not just make your cancer more manageable, it may improve your overall health and wellness.

### Have questions?

We can be your guide to local support groups, organizations like CRC across the country, information in other languages, travel assistance, local support services, caregiving issues, and so much more. If you can't find what you're looking for, please call us at 277-0960 or email [info@crcl.net](mailto:info@crcl.net).



# Benefits of Exercise for Stress Management

It is common knowledge that nearly everyone can benefit from exercise. Aside from helping you control your weight, it also reduces your risk of cardiovascular disease and Type 2 Diabetes, and strengthens your bones and muscles.



Most importantly, exercise can play a large role in improving your mental health, overall mood, and managing stress!

Research on exercise for cancer survivors has shown it can have the following effects on:

- Improved fatigue
- Improved quality of life
- Decreased anxiety and depression
- Improved independence
- Improved mood

The American Cancer Society recommends that cancer survivors:

- Engage in regular physical activity
- Avoid inactivity and return to normal daily activities as soon as possible following diagnosis
- Aim to exercise at least 150 minutes per week
- Include strength training exercises at least 2 days per week

There is also research which lays out guidelines for exercise during all stages of cancer treatment and survivorship:

## During Cancer Treatment

Evidence shows that “exercise is not only proven to be safe and feasible during cancer treatment, but that it can also improve physical functioning, fatigue, and multiple aspects of quality of life.”

Research shows that exercising during chemotherapy will not have a negative impact on treatment and some research claims that it may actually improve the efficacy of chemotherapy. Individuals who exercised regularly prior to cancer treatment may need to consider decreasing intensity or frequency based on treatment side effects. Additionally, individuals who did not previously exercise on a regular basis should speak to their physician and take into account any side effects they are experiencing from treatment.

## Immediately Following Treatment

Many factors affecting quality of life quickly resolve after cessation of treatment such as nausea and fatigue, usually within weeks or months. This is an excellent time

to give your body time to readjust and to focus on any nutritional deficits before beginning a new exercise program.



Exercise with a friend for extra motivation and good company

## Long-Term Disease-Free Living

After your body has readjusted, it is now time to set goals for lifelong weight management, physical activity, and a healthy lifestyle. Constructing and following a plan puts you in control of the direction of your health and wellness.

## Continued

Below are some helpful tidbits to help you get started!

Tips to reduce fatigue and stress:

- Set up a daily routine and be active when you feel your best
- Get regular, light-to-moderate intensity exercise
- Get fresh air whenever possible
- Eat a balanced diet that includes protein (talk to your doctor about any diet modifications)
- Drink about 8 to 10 glasses of water (unless your doctor tells you not to)

- Use relaxation and visualization techniques to reduce stress
- Balance activity with rest that does not interfere with nighttime sleep
- Ask for help when you need it

Ideas for incorporating exercise into your everyday life:

- Park towards the back of the parking lot and walk into the store
- Take a walk after dinner
- Do yard work such as mowing the lawn

- Schedule short workouts into your day
- Use the stairs instead of the elevator

A complete summary of the research is available through the American Cancer Society at: <https://www.cancer.org/health-care-professionals/american-cancer-society-prevention-early-detection-guidelines/nupa-guidelines-for-cancer-survivors.html>

# Yoga for Stress Management

With gentle poses and minimal equipment required, yoga is an ideal supplement to a regular exercise regimen for cancer survivors. Current research shows that yoga is a low risk exercise for cancer survivors though as always, it is important to talk to your doctor when starting a new exercise regimen.



There is a large amount of research available on yoga's effect on stress and overall wellness for the cancer survivor population. This research shows similar results across many different types and stages of cancer but it is important to remember that yoga can have a different effect on everyone. Here are some ways the research shows yoga can potentially affect your wellbeing:

- Reduce stress levels
- Improve quality of sleep
- Reduce insomnia
- Reduce general fatigue and pain
- Reduce emotional distress and fear
- Improve mood and outlook on life
- Decrease or manage anxiety and depression symptoms
- Improve overall quality of life
- Improve self-esteem

- Improve physical cancer symptoms

Research also shows that yoga can have similar effects for family members and caregivers of cancer survivors.

## Local Yoga Resources in the Ithaca Community:

Nick Boyar is a yoga instructor who teaches a class called Gentle Yoga for People With Cancer at Island Health and Fitness on

## Continued

Tuesdays from 9:30-11:00 am. This class is free to clients of the Cancer Resource Center of the Finger Lakes. See the link below for more details:

<http://nickboyar.com/healing-services/>

There are many other yoga options in Ithaca if you are looking to take more regular classes or expand your yoga practice. Some of these options include: Blackbird Studio, Mighty Yoga, and Sunrise Yoga which all have websites available.

### Online Yoga Resources

The internet provides a seemingly endless supply of yoga videos and poses which allow the opportunity to find a style or instructor that fits you. We encourage you to explore many options to help you find your perfect fit. We do know that trying to sort through all of these options can pose an overwhelming task.

Therefore we wanted to provide you with one option which we have found to be comprehensive. Yoga with Adriene is a yoga channel with an extensive collection of yoga videos available on YouTube for public use. Adriene is an upbeat, relatable yogi who offers variations of poses and creates a sense of community even when doing videos at home. Follow the links below to find the Yoga with Adriene channel and two specific yoga practices related to stress relief:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/yogawithadriene>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsOqcwcy2mI>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJbRpHZr\\_d0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJbRpHZr_d0)

One additional resource we wanted to highlight is Yoga4Cancer which is a specialized, comprehensive

program designed for cancer survivors. The purpose of this program is to stimulate the immune system through movement, improve flexibility and strength, reduce anxiety, and improve overall well-being. This program can be accessed in many ways, including classes and private sessions in New York City, online workshops, and yoga retreats. The program's book, *Yoga for Cancer: A Guide to Managing Side Effects, Boosting Immunity, and Improving Recovery for Cancer Survivors*, is available through all major booksellers and provides 53 poses and 20 sequences that are adaptable to all levels of ability and types of cancer. Two specific benefits Yoga4Cancer reports include detoxifying the body and improving body image. You may visit the site [www.y4c.com](http://www.y4c.com) for more information on this program.



# Gentle Yoga Sequence for Cancer Survivors



Easy Pose



Extended Puppy Pose



Cow Pose



Cat Pose



Extended Child's Pose



Reclining Twist



Tree Pose

Tree Pose Progression



Legs Up the Wall



Shoulder Stand Pose

# Mindfulness

Mindfulness is an innate human ability we all possess to varying degrees. Defined by the Merriam Webster Dictionary as, "the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis," the practice has been increasing in popularity over the years.



It has also been a popular topic of study in many populations, including cancer survivors. In fact, research has shown that mindfulness improves psychological and physiological outcomes related to anxiety and/or stress, overall quality of life, and sleep in a variety of cancer survivor populations.

It makes sense why mindfulness can have such a positive effect, given how stressful and anxiety-inducing cancer is on both survivors and their loved ones. The practice emphasizes both being present and acceptance, meaning we pay attention to all of the thoughts and feelings that appear in our mind and don't judge them as "right" or "wrong." Instead, we acknowledge them as they are.

Though meditation is a common method utilized to practice mindfulness, there are many other ways to include it in our daily lives. Some ideas include:

- Make ordinary, repetitive occasions such as the telephone ringing or a stoplight as a reminder to notice your breath and the activity in your mind

for a few moments.

- Practice bringing mindful attention to various daily activities, such as brushing your teeth, making your bed, driving, etc.
- Make waiting in the doctor's office a time to turn inward and ask yourself, "Am I awake now?"
- When you're in a hurry, ask yourself, "Do I really need to hurry?"
- Experiment with being compassionate and nonjudgmental with yourself when you are reminded of your limitations.

In addition to mindfulness, there are other activities that can be incorporated into your daily life which promote relaxation techniques and lower stress. These can be learned and practiced on your own or with the assistance of a counselor. While there are proven benefits to practicing these relaxation techniques daily, they are also helpful at specific stressful times, such as before or during a medical procedure.

**Relaxed or deep breathing:** This technique involves deep, slow

breathing while concentrating on filling the lungs and relaxing muscles. Focus on having your belly expand as you inhale and slowly relax as you exhale. There are many videos available to guide your breathing such as:

<https://youtu.be/aXItOY0sLRY>

**Mental imagery or visualization:**

Visualize peaceful and relaxing images in your mind. These can range anywhere from a favorite vacation spot to a special memory of time spent with loved ones.

**Progressive muscle relaxation:**

This technique involves squeezing muscles for a few seconds until you feel tension and then relaxing them, deliberately focusing on the difference between the tension and relaxation. People typically start with their toes, then move up to the ankles, and progress all the way through their forehead.

**Meditation:** With this technique, you can learn to relax your mind and concentrate on an inner sense of calm. There are many free guided meditations available on YouTube, as well as on websites such as:

<https://www.tarabrach.com/guide-d-meditations/>



Especially with such a serious and emotionally charged diagnosis as cancer, finding a supportive community can offer helpful perspective. Research has shown that social support can play a large role in decreasing overall stress levels and improving quality of life for cancer survivors. Social support may also decrease emotional distress and depressive symptoms, and increase chances of survival. These trends hold true whether the support comes from family, friends, your physician, a professional providing individual or group therapy, or from peers in community or online-based support

## Social Support

Social support is invaluable when it comes to dealing with a new medical diagnosis.

groups. Below is a list of resources offered by the Cancer Resource Center of the Finger Lakes (CRCFL) to cancer survivors and family members.

### One to One Assistance

- Available to patients, survivors, family members, friends, and professionals.
- Includes assistance such as transportation, financial guidance, check in phone calls, acupuncture, yoga, water exercise classes, and more.

### Support Groups

- Women's Noon Group
- Men's Breakfast Club

- First Tuesday Open House
- Young Adult Group
- Colorectal Group
- Caregiver Group
- Pat's Group

### Community Education and Resources

- Individual pages for specific cancers
- Cancer information in multiple languages
- Helpful travel information
- Compilation of local resources

You may see the CRCFL website for full details of services offered: <http://www.crcfl.net>

## Nutrition for Cancer Survivors

“You are what you eat.”

What we choose to consume not only affects our physical health, but also our mental and emotional health. In this way, you can use what you eat to help manage stress. Following a recommended diet for cancer survivors may relieve some of the effects of the mental and physiologic stressors associated with living with cancer. The following recommendations are the results of a five-year examination of the literature for food, nutrition and

physical activity for the prevention of cancer. They are published by The World Cancer Research Fund and the American Institute for Cancer Research.

### Body Fat

Be as lean as possible within the normal range of body weight. It is recommended to maintain a BMI in the normal range, though this may not be applicable to individuals with high body muscle content. Increased BMI/obesity presents an

increased risk for various cancers.

### Foods and drinks that promote weight gain

Limit your consumption of energy-dense foods (those containing substantial amounts of fat and sugar). Avoid drinks with added sugar, including fruit juices.

### Plant foods

Eat mostly foods of plant origin: Five servings of a variety of non-starchy vegetables and fruits every



day is recommended. Eat unprocessed cereals and/or legumes with every meal. Non-starchy vegetables and fruits include asparagus, cucumber, spinach, melons, berries, citrus, etc. Unprocessed legumes include quinoa, barley, lentils, etc.

### Animal foods

Limit your intake of red meat to 18 oz per week. Avoid processed meats, including those that are smoked, cured, salted, or contain chemical preservatives.

### Alcoholic drinks

Limit your consumption of alcoholic drinks. If you do consume alcoholic drinks, it is recommended that you limit your consumption to no more than two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women.

### Preservation, processing, preparation

Limit your consumption of salt. Avoid moldy cereals (grains) or legumes, which may contain aflatoxins (which increase your risk of developing liver cancer).

### Dietary supplements

Aim to meet your nutritional needs through diet alone. Supplements are not recommended for cancer prevention.

### Optimize GI Health

Consume fermented foods, probiotics, and fiber-rich foods. Raspberries, whole-wheat spaghetti, split peas, black beans, lima beans, artichoke, and green peas all have more than 6 grams of fiber per serving.

### Limit caffeine intake

### Adjust Quality and Quantity of Dietary Fats

Decrease your intake of animal fats and trans fats. Increase your intake of omega-3 and monounsaturated fats. Trans fats will state “partially hydrogenated oil” in the ingredients list. Foods high in omega-3 are fish. The fish highest in omega-3 are mackerel, lake trout, herring, sardines, albacore tuna, salmon, and halibut.

### Reduce toxin exposure

Eat organic/chemical-free foods as much as possible.

### Anti-inflammatory diet

An anti-inflammatory diet has been suggested to decrease recurrence of cancer. According to the Mayo Clinic, the following are guidelines to building an anti-inflammatory diet. A plant-based diet including vegetables, fruits and beans is important. Plant foods high in antioxidants are also recommended, including Goji berries, wild blueberries, dark chocolate, pecans, artichoke, elderberries, kidney beans, and cranberries. It is important to make sure that you are eating a balanced diet and that you do not focus all your attention on one food group.

### The following are other helpful resources for developing a balanced diet focused on cancer prevention:

The New American Plate  
<http://www.aicr.org/new-american-plate/>

Cooking for Cancer Prevention  
<http://www.aicr.org/healthyrecipes/>

A Model for A Cancer Preventive Plate  
<http://www.aicr.org/new-american-plate/cancer-preventive-diet-model-plate.html>



# Finding a Realistic Work-Life Balance

Twenty percent of workforce professionals report working at least 49 hours per week. Even when people have vacation time, they are often afraid to take it at the risk of missing out on professional opportunities.



Studies have shown that stress at work is as detrimental as secondhand smoke. Stress has been proven to be associated with many adverse health conditions, including heart disease, obesity, and some types of cancer. It can be hard in today's achievement-driven culture to find a way to balance work, home life, and self-care. The only tip which will work for every person is to find a balance and strategy that works for you. Everyone has different responsibilities and interests and it is important to find the work-life balance that makes you feel fulfilled. The following are some general tips to pick and choose from in order to jumpstart your balance strategy.

**Avoid making perfectionism your goal.** Wanting to be perfect at everything will set you up for failure as you expand your life.

**Treat work like interval training.** According to an article published in Harvard Business Review, workers may have better productivity and work-life balance by training like athletes, dividing work into three phases.

- Performance and Development: Spend most of your time preparing for big

projects, expanding your own skill set, etc.

- Exertion: Allow yourself to overwork briefly while making a big presentation, reaching a looming deadline, etc.
- Recovery: Take lunch breaks, relax on weekends, and use those vacation days to recover from the exertion of a big project.

**Do not make yourself available 24/7.** This might mean turning off your phone at night, during your child's orchestra performance or only answering work emails during the work day. There are many ways to technologically tune out from work to facilitate separate work and home spaces. This is especially important if you work from home.

**It is important to establish boundaries at work and stick to them.** If this is something you know you have trouble with, consider discussing this with your boss or ask a friend or coworker to help hold you accountable. Make sure you prioritize tasks and learn to politely say, "No."

**Exercise daily.** See the previous pages on Exercise and Yoga for Cancer Survivors for more detailed guidelines and tips.

**Get enough sleep.** Chronic lack of

sleep has been shown to make people more susceptible to a host of health conditions. The National Sleep Foundation recommends that adults 18 to 64 years old need an average of 7-9 hours of sleep per night. They also suggest that less than 6 hours and more than 10-11 hours may be further detrimental. For adults 65 years and older, an average of 7-8 hours is recommended with no less than 5 hours and no more than 9 hours per night.

**Find a mindfulness practice.** Do yoga, meditate or just practice being present. Life is what happens while we are busy making other plans. See the previous pages on Yoga and Mindfulness for suggestions.

**Build a strong support system.** Find coworkers and friends to rely on at work and friends and family to rely on at home. Maintaining a work-life balance often means delegating certain tasks to others and it is important to have a support system you can rely on. It is equally important to have people to fall back on when you lose track of your work-life balance, to help you forgive yourself and find your way back.

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