

Physiotherapy + Cancer

Facts about physiotherapy's role in cancer rehabilitation



Cancer is a leading cause of death in Alberta. Fortunately as diagnosis and treatments improve, so do the number of cancer survivors. However, survivors often face disease and treatment-related challenges, which physiotherapists specializing in cancer rehabilitation can assess and treat. Physiotherapy is particularly effective for those who develop lymphedema after cancer-surgery. In fact, significantly fewer women developed lymphedema when they had physiotherapy, compared to women who only received lymphedema-prevention education.

Cancer facts:

- Canadians have a 40 - 45% probability of developing cancer during their lifetime. In 2011, approximately 16,200 new cancer cases and 9,300 deaths will occur in Alberta.¹
- More than 30% of cancer can be prevented by modifying key risk factors of being overweight/obese and physically inactive.²
- 150 minutes/week of moderate intensity activity can reduce the risk of colon and breast cancer.³
- Survival rates are increasing. Five-year survival rates in Alberta are: 92% for prostate, 88% for breast, 62% for colorectal, and 14% for lung.¹
- Research shows physical activity helps the effect of cancer treatment and survival rates. Supervised exercise programs during and after treatment show positive benefits on strength, cancer-related fatigue, physical functioning, and quality of life.⁴⁻⁹
- Studies show a link between physical activity and long-term cancer-survival rates. Higher physical activity levels reduced breast related cancer deaths by 34% and colorectal deaths by 50%.^{8,9}
- Generally, cancers survivors have low levels of physical activity. Less than 22% of cancers survivors are physically active.¹⁰
- Increasingly, cancer survivors want to return to normal activities including work. Cancers survivors are poorly integrated back into the workforce due to lack of health care provider and employer knowledge on return-to-work practices.¹¹

How physiotherapists help Albertans with cancer:

- **Assess and treat physical impairments + dysfunction caused by cancer and/or its treatment** e.g., frozen shoulder, nerve damage, limb amputation, weakness and paralysis, numbness and tingling (peripheral neuropathy), joint mobility, and balance and coordination problems. Physiotherapists help patients improve movement, strengthen weakened muscles and learn new ways to move.
- **Prescribe specific therapeutic exercise programs** after cancer surgery/radiotherapy (e.g., supervise resistive strengthening/aerobic exercise to improve strength, tolerance and fatigue).¹²
- **Assess + treat lymphedema** - a common complication of breast cancer surgery. Lymphedema can be very debilitating—causing pain, function loss, anxiety, disfigurement, depression and emotional distress, and sometimes infection. Fortunately, lymphedema can be successfully managed with compression therapy and resistive exercises. A new study shows lymphedema can be prevented or reduced if patients receive physiotherapy soon after their operation.¹²⁻¹³
- **Assess and treat urinary incontinence** - a common outcome of prostate removal or radiotherapy that is not only embarrassing but hugely affects quality of life. Physiotherapists help men successfully manage incontinence with education, pelvic floor exercises and bladder retraining.
- **Assess and treat head + neck cancer damage** - Nerve damage is common and can affect arm function and posture. Specific strengthening exercises have been shown to improve both function and quality of life.



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Key References

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