

# What Helps or Hinders Physical Activity Engagement Following a Diagnosis of Cancer?

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## Background

Physical activity:

- may help control side effects of cancer and cancer-related treatments, and improve fatigue, physical function and quality of life in several cancers<sup>1-3</sup>; and
- has been shown to be safe both during and after cancer treatments<sup>1</sup>.

Despite this, research suggests cancer survivors reduce their participation in physical activity during and after treatment and struggle to meet activity recommendations following completion of treatment<sup>4-6</sup>

## Aim

To explore cancer survivors' perspectives of the barriers and facilitators to physical activity engagement following a diagnosis of cancer.

## Method

- Qualitative Descriptive Methodology<sup>7</sup>
- Semi-structured interviews
- Conventional Content Analysis<sup>8</sup>

## Participants (n=25)

- 60% Female
- 33-84 years old
- ≤5 years post-diagnosis
- Diversity of cancer types including:  
32% Breast, 16% Bowel, 16% Prostate
- 68% self-reported restricted or decreased physical activity engagement post-diagnosis

*"I'm trying to exercise more everyday because I'm really aware that to keep the cancer away I need to keep my blood oxygenated [...] and I don't want it coming back"*

(Female, 59)

*"Cancer's a funny thing because while you're having the treatment and things you get a lot of attention [...] But, once you're put out back into the world, you're left hung out to dry a wee bit"*

(Female, 55)

### You're on your own

A sense of abandonment post-treatment and lack of sufficient and tailored information.

### Meaning of Physical Activity

The meanings people ascribe to physical activity (e.g. a tool for recovery, a second chance, getting back to life).

### Dis-ease

Disruption to self and identity, heightened awareness of physical self, fragility and uncertainty.

*"I can see the lack of body tone – I've got skin folds in my arms and chest at the moment because I'm about 7-8 kg underweight [...] and I still push out things but I don't have the former muscle power that I used to have"*

(Male, 65)

### Becoming Acclimatised

A process of trial and error and adjustment in the face of treatment-related side effects and residual impairment.

### Importance of Others

Encouragement and support from family and friends and cancer-specific exercise groups.

*"I feel completely overwhelmed, deflated, jaded, dejected. I think you just feel fragile after the operation—you don't have the confidence in your body. I'm less robust than I used to be."*

(Female, 62)

## Conclusion

- Physical activity can represent a return to meaningful activities following cancer and is important for the management of treatment-related side effects and maintaining broader health and well-being
- However, engagement following a diagnosis of cancer can be complex and challenging
- Rehabilitation practitioners may play an important role in supporting, providing practical tailored advice, and enabling cancer survivors to re-engage in physical activities that are important to them.

## References

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