

Q. Can a regular exercise program reduce the risk of getting cancer?

A. The short answer is yes, for several cancers. The American Cancer Society (ACS) states that regular physical activity can help reduce the risk of getting breast, colon, ovarian, and pancreatic cancer.

Regular exercise may help prevent cancer by reducing excess body weight, lowering blood insulin levels (also helping prevent type 2 diabetes), and decreasing food transit time in the gut. It may also directly improve the body's immune system which is critical in fighting off cancer.

Three recent studies listed by the ACS showed that a high level of physical activity was linked to a lower risk of cancer. In China, women who have high levels of physical activity cut their risk of ovarian cancer in half compared to more sedentary women. Protective activities include: "vigorous work" leading to sweating, brisk walking, jogging, or bike riding, and strenuous sports.

Another study sponsored by the ACS showed a 30% reduction in the risk of breast cancer in women who were very active (e.g., swimming, running, or jogging about an hour a day). While more moderate levels of physical activity had some benefit, more vigorous activities or exercising for longer periods of time seem to have more benefit.

The third study involved both men and women. Researchers found that, compared to more sedentary individuals, people who exercise the equivalent of

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jogging 45-60 minutes daily had a 40-50% decrease in risk of colorectal cancer. Again, moderate activity had benefit, but the most benefit came from more vigorous activity or longer duration activities.

The ACS physical activity guidelines state that everyone needs at least a half hour of moderate intensity physical activity daily or most days, but for even more benefit in preventing cancer, aim for 45-60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity daily. Be sure you start at an easy pace and slowly, progress to longer and more intense physical activities. If you have any health problems, be sure to get your doctor's clearance and guidance before beginning a vigorous exercise program.

Other ACS lifestyle-related preventive actions you can take include:

- ✓ Maintain a healthy weight (losing even 10-15 pounds can help if overweight).
- ✓ Eat more fruits and vegetables, up to 7-10 servings daily for best health.
- ✓ Choose at least 3 servings of whole grains daily (whole-wheat bread, brown rice, whole-grain pasta, steel-cut oats, etc.).
- ✓ If you eat meat, cut back on red meats like beef, pork, and lamb, and processed meats like hot dogs, bologna, and luncheon meats.
- ✓ And of course, don't smoke.

