

Move to survive cancer

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Translated from Le Journal de Montréal, April 4th, 2022

Recent research shows that cancer survivors who spend a lot of time sitting and doing little physical activity have a much higher risk of death than physically active survivors.

It is estimated that about two-thirds of people who are affected by cancer are still alive more than five years after diagnosis.

With the aging of the population, this means that the number of cancer survivors will increase dramatically over the next few years and could reach 70 million people globally in 2050.

This situation poses a particular challenge, because cancer survivors are generally more at risk of being affected again by the disease during their lifetime (sometimes several decades after the end of treatments) and are also at a greater risk to develop other chronic diseases, especially cardiovascular diseases (1).

Identifying factors that can prevent the recurrence of cancer and reduce the risk of premature mortality in general is therefore extremely important to maximize the survival of survivors.

BENEFITS OF EXERCISE

One aspect of the lifestyle of cancer survivors that can certainly play a role is physical exercise.

Studies show that activity levels are extremely low among cancer survivors, with more than a third of this population not engaging in leisure-time physical activity and instead spending most of their waking hours in a seated position. This sedentary lifestyle is absolutely harmful, as many studies have shown that physical activity is associated with improved survival for patients with several types of cancer.

This association is observed both for the exercise carried out before the diagnosis of the disease and after the end of the treatments, but seems particularly strong for the levels of exercise which are carried out post-diagnosis (2).

Reducing sitting time and increasing physical activity levels therefore seem to represent a simple way to improve the chances of survival after cancer.

MORTALITY REDUCTION

The positive impact of exercise is well illustrated by the results of a prospective study, carried out among 1535 cancer survivors who were followed for a period of 9 years (3).

In this study, the researchers looked at three sedentary parameters, namely the level of physical activity per week, the number of hours spent in a sitting position per day and a combination of the two.

The results are dramatic and show how essential an active lifestyle is to improving the chances of surviving cancer.



The study reports that in active survivors, who do a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate activity per week, the risk of cancer-related death or death in general is reduced by 70% compared to people who do little or no activity at all.

The same goes for the time spent in a sitting position: compared to survivors who sit less than 4 hours a day, those who sit more than 8 hours a day have a risk of cancer mortality and general mortality increased by 127% and 81%, respectively.

However, it is the combination of time spent sitting and physical inactivity that is most damaging, with an increase in mortality risk of approximately 500% observed in survivors who do not engage in physical activity and who sit for more than 8 hours a day.

For people who have been treated for cancer, it is therefore possible to drastically increase the chances of survival by adopting an active lifestyle, in which the time spent sitting idle is reduced to a minimum and used instead to do exercise, for example 30 minutes a day of simple intensity physical activity such as brisk walking.

- (1) Cao Z et al. The role of healthy lifestyle in cancer incidence and temporal transitions to cardiometabolic disease. *JACC CardioOncol.* 2021; 3:663-674.
- (2) Patel AV et al. American College of Sports Medicine roundtable report on physical activity, sedentary behavior, and cancer prevention and control. *Med. Sci. Sports Exerc.* 2019; 51:2391-2402.
- (3) Cao C et al. Association of daily sitting time and leisure-time physical activity with survival among US cancer survivors. *JAMA Oncol.* 2022; 8:395-403.