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Exercise may significantly improve survival in people treated for colon cancer

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Translated from Le Journal de Montréal, August 11th, 2025.

A large-scale clinical study has shown that regular physical activity reduces the risk of recurrence and significantly improves survival in people treated for colon cancer.

Standard treatment for stage III colon cancer consists of surgery followed by 3 to 6 months of chemotherapy. This approach achieves a 5-year survival rate of approximately 70%. This leaves a significant proportion of patients who respond poorly to these treatments and experience a cancer recurrence in the months that follow, compromising their likelihood of surviving the disease.

CLINICAL STUDIES

Several population-based studies suggest that exercise could represent a complementary approach to current medical treatments and improve the survival of patients with colorectal cancer.

For example, it has been observed that those who engage in regular recreational physical activity after treatment have a lower risk of cancer recurrence and death, including among those with advanced (stage III) colon cancer.

This positive impact of exercise on colorectal cancer survival has recently been conclusively proven by the results of a randomized clinical trial conducted in collaboration by Canadian researchers (1).

This type of clinical trial is the gold standard for evaluating the effectiveness of an intervention (or drug), as participants are randomly assigned to a control group and a group receiving the intervention, minimizing the influence of external factors.

However, while randomized clinical trials are the standard for drug evaluation, they are much more difficult to conduct for measuring the impact of lifestyle on cancer, as they require close monitoring of patients over several years to ensure their adherence to the intervention being studied (in this case, exercise).

It should also be noted that lifestyle interventions, unlike medications, are not marketable, and it is very difficult to obtain the necessary funding to cover the high costs associated with this type of clinical trial. For all these reasons, conducting a randomized clinical trial investigating the influence of lifestyle on cancer is a real feat.

ACTIVELY FIGHTING CANCER

This study involved 889 patients with stage III (or high-risk stage II) colon cancer who had undergone standard surgery and chemotherapy. The researchers randomly assigned these patients to a control group (n=444), which received only theoretical instructions promoting physical activity and a healthy diet, and a treatment group (n=445), which, in addition to these instructions, also received practical support from a physical activity

consultant for three years to increase and maintain the patients' aerobic activity.

Patients could choose several activities (cycling, jogging, swimming), but most opted for a 45-minute brisk walk four times a week.

The results were spectacular: after 5 years, 80% of patients in the exercise group were still in remission, with no disease recurrence, compared to 74% in the control group. In the longer term (8 years), the survival rate for patients in the exercise group was 90% compared to 83% for the control group, which means that for every 14 people, exercise prevented one death during this period.

This is a significant positive effect, especially considering that patients in the control group were still influenced by the educational materials provided to them and significantly increased their exercise levels (50% increase compared to 100% for the intervention group).

It is therefore very likely that the benefits associated with post-treatment exercise are even greater compared to patients who remain completely sedentary, without having been made aware of the benefits of exercise.

(1) Courneya KS et al. «Structured exercise after adjuvant chemotherapy for colon cancer». N Engl J Med. 2025; 393(1):13-25.

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