Physical Activity Can Significantly Improve Quality Of Life After Colorectal Cancer

New studies find that sitting less, and moving more, improves quality of life for colorectal cancer survivors.

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The American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) and World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF) announce two new studies that find reducing sedentary behavior and increasing physical activity have a positive impact on the quality of life for colorectal cancer survivors.

The first study, published in Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise, followed nearly 400 colorectal cancer survivors for two years after diagnosis to assess how sedentary behavior and moderate-to-vigorous physical activity impact health-related quality of life and fatigue. The results show that a combination of leading a less sedentary lifestyle and doing more physical activity improved health-related quality of life and reduced fatigue levels in this population.

Importantly, the findings also show that decreasing prolonged sedentary behavior has a positive impact even without increasing moderate-to-vigorous physical activity levels. This finding may be particularly relevant to survivors who are unable to perform higher intensity activities (moderate-to-vigorous intensity), such as brisk walking or running, because of their age and/or comorbidities. For those survivors, breaking up sedentary time with activities such as gentle housework or light walking may be particularly effective and a relevant target for future lifestyle interventions. Moreover, the study shows that the combination of sitting less and moving more was especially powerful for improving the daily functioning of survivors after their cancer treatment.

The biological mechanisms are not yet known, but a second study funded by WCRF and led by Professor Matty Weijenberg and published in Scientific Reports found higher levels of anti-inflammatory molecules in the blood of colorectal cancer survivors who had higher levels of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. This could potentially explain the health-enhancing effects of physical activity in colorectal cancer survivors and support its future integration into post-treatment care in this population.

Dr Nigel Brockton, Vice President of Research at the American Institute for Cancer Research, said “Being physically active as part of everyday life is one of AICR’s 10 Cancer Prevention

Recommendations. This latest research adds to the emerging evidence that making physical activity part of daily life, and reducing sedentary time, can really help after diagnosis, too. This is not about running marathons; these are small, realistic changes that people can focus on to move more and sit less to substantially improve quality of life and reduce fatigue after diagnosis."

Lead researcher, Dr Martijn Bours of Maastricht University commented on the findings: "We are at an exciting age in colorectal cancer research, where we are seeing a growing population of people who are surviving the illness. But it is common to see long-lasting health problems related to a cancer diagnosis and treatment, for instance, fatigue and nerve damage following chemotherapy, which can have a negative impact on daily functioning and quality of life. Whilst we need to do more investigational studies to confirm these findings, this research suggests that by being physically active and reducing the amount of sedentary time, we may be able to reduce the impact of these long-lasting health problems and improve the daily functioning and quality of life of cancer survivors."

Colorectal cancer, is the third most common cancer in the U.S. According to the American Cancer Society, in 2020 there were 104,610 new cases of colon cancer and 43,340 cases of rectal cancer diagnosed in the U.S., and 53,200 people died from colorectal cancer in 2020, including 3,640 men and women younger than age 50. Colorectal cancer is common in adults aged 60+, but cases are rising in adults under 50, and there have been recent calls to lower the screening age from 50 to 45.

It is currently estimated that 55% of colorectal cancer cases are preventable due to lifestyle factors, which include eating too much red and processed meat, not eating enough foods containing fiber or whole grains, having overweight or obesity, not doing enough physical activity, drinking alcohol and smoking tobacco. Research shows that following AICR's 10 Cancer Prevention Recommendations that include advice for eating healthily, living an active life and maintaining a healthy weight can substantially reduce cancer risk.

AICR's Cancer Health Check tool and Cancer Prevention Recommendations help people understand what changes they can make to reduce the risk of getting cancer. Based on the latest scientific research, the advice is practical and simple to understand.

About the Recommendations:

AICR/WCRF analyze the scientific evidence from around the world and translate the results into practical, easy-to-follow cancer prevention advice—our 10 Cancer Prevention Recommendations. These Recommendations are intended to reduce the risk of cancer by helping people to maintain a healthy weight and adopt healthy patterns of eating, drinking and physical activity throughout life. The Recommendations include:

- Be a healthy weight
- Be physically active

- Eat a diet rich in whole grains, vegetables, fruits and beans
- Limit consumption of “fast foods” and other processed foods high in fat, starches or sugars
- Limit consumption of red and processed meat
- Limit consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks
- Limit alcohol consumption
- Do not use supplements for cancer prevention
- For mothers: breastfeed your baby, if you can
- After a cancer diagnosis: follow our Recommendations, if you can

AICR is part of a network of charities based in the US, UK and EU. This particular study was funded by AICR’s sister charity in the Netherlands, Wereld Kanker Onderzoek Fonds (WKOF).

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