

Being active when you have colorectal cancer

This leaflet provides information to support people to be more physically active, to help them prepare for the intensive treatment they are about to undergo and support them during and after treatment. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to the staff member in charge of your care.

This guide will help you to be active on 5 days each week, building up to 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity, and 2 strength training sessions each week.

What is physical activity and why is it important?

Physical activity is any body movement that works your muscles and enhances your health. There are many examples; walking, running, dancing, gardening, yoga, strengthening exercises, balance exercises, the list is endless.

There is growing evidence on the role of physical activity if you have colorectal cancer. It has been shown to be beneficial before during and after treatment.

Reduced
colorectal surgery
postoperative
complications

Li et al. (2025)

Helps to
manage the
side effects of
colorectal
cancer
treatments

Improves
strength,
flexibility and
endurance

Reduces the
risk of
developing
other
conditions

28% reduction
in the risk of
colorectal
cancer
returning

Courneya et al. (2025)

It is recommended that adults do some form of physical activity every day, building up to being able to do 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity each week. Being active can help your wellbeing, both physically and mentally. If you think of your cancer treatment like a marathon, this guide will help you to train and will help you to build activity into your normal routine for ongoing health benefits to help you to cope with your cancer treatment.

Please note that there may be some activity restrictions if you have surgery, so please follow the guidance of your team to help you continue to be active after your treatment.

Before starting a physical activity programme

If you get any of the following problems, then seek medical help before exercising. This can be from your GP, or from A&E if it is an emergency. Shortness of breath at rest or with minimal activity, shortness of breath while lying flat, ankle swelling, fast heart rate, chest pain, dizziness or collapse.

How hard should I work when I am being active?

We recommend you work at a 'moderate intensity'. You will feel a bit warmer and will feel that your breathing is a bit deeper and faster, but you should still be able to talk to someone next to you. If you are struggling to talk, or gasping for breath, you are working too hard, slow down. If it feels very easy and you are able to sing all the words to a song, you can work a bit harder.

How do I start to be active?

It can be daunting to start being active and it can be difficult to know where to start. Everyone starts from a different level. You may be someone who

- already exercises regularly
- is active but doesn't do any exercise that makes them feel out of breath
- isn't very active or doesn't leave the home very often

We would like you to start exercising at a level that feels comfortable to you now. It is important that you **start slowly** and **progress gradually**, this will reduce your risk of having an injury.

Keep hydrated whilst you are being active, if you have a stoma, fizzy sports drinks that are carbonated may fill your bag with gas, which may be uncomfortable whilst trying to be active.

Remember to wear supportive shoes, or trainers that are comfortable.

Sun protection is also important, particularly if you are undergoing systemic anti-cancer therapy (SACT), as that can make your skin more sensitive.

Being active before my operation or treatment?

Many people don't have much notice of their surgery or cancer treatment starting, but doing as many activity sessions as you can, will still be beneficial. Practicing your core exercises before surgery helps you to do them after surgery.

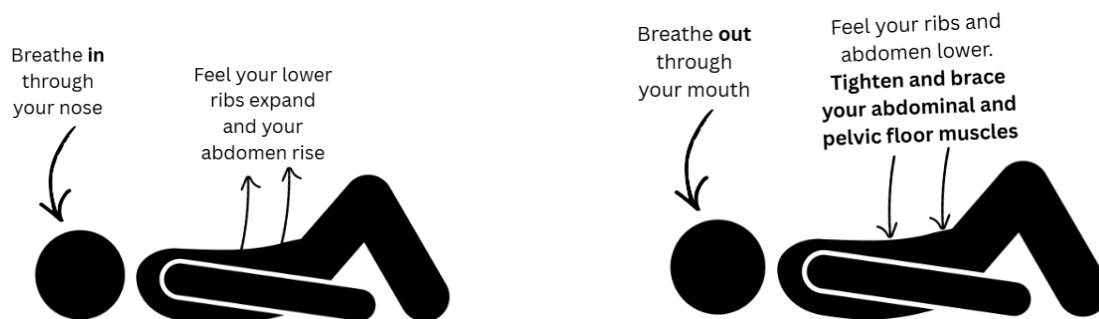
Being active during SACT/systemic anti-cancer therapy

Being active can help to manage your energy levels and reduce the feeling of fatigue that people can experience. Plan your activity around treatment cycles so you can do more on good days and less on other days.

Being active after colorectal surgery

After surgery, it is important to think of your posture and understand your breathing and the impact it has on your abdominal pressure. This is the first step in helping you to develop your core strength after surgery.

During your exercises, or when you are lifting objects or exerting yourself, we recommend that you try these breathing exercises. Start by relaxing your upper chest and shoulders.



Pelvic floor exercises

Pelvic floor exercises can be really helpful for people with colorectal cancer as some treatments may affect or weaken the muscles.

The following links and QR code will take you to two videos that explain how to do pelvic floor exercises. The videos use gendered language and include references to anatomy. Please be aware that these exercises are relevant to people of all genders, bodies, and anatomy, and you are welcome to adapt the guidance in a way that feels most comfortable and appropriate for you.

The St George's Hospital website also has a leaflet titled "[pelvic floor exercises for all](#)", which uses more inclusive language and provides additional helpful information.



[Pelvic floor muscle exercises](#) – female anatomy





If you have had stoma surgery you may find this progressive series of core exercises from the 2025 [Expass recommendations](#) helpful (see Appendix 7 – page 570).

Tips for being physically active if you have a stoma

1. Empty your stoma bag before being physically active
2. Activity triggers stoma activity, if you still have a rectum, it can also trigger a discharge of mucous or blood from the rectum. To manage this, it can be helpful to wear a pad to contain any leakage.
3. You may find that you need to interrupt your activity session to go to the toilet to empty your stoma bag, don't worry, having these breaks will not reduce the benefit that you are getting from being active. Have a 'Toilet card' or 'Just can't wait' card (see QR code) to help you with quick access to toilets if needed
4. Wearing dark coloured clothing can disguise if you have any leakage from the bag.
5. Take spare supplies with you, including a disposal bag, wipes and hand sanitiser



Please be aware to stop your activity:

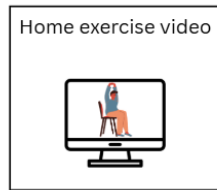
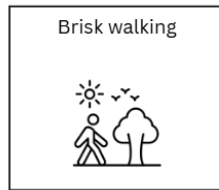
If you have significant doming or bulging around the abdomen or the stoma site, pain or pulling sensation around the stoma, or prolapse of stoma during or after activity, scale things back a little and seek advice from your stoma care team.

How to use this information

If you have an established physical activity programme, please continue with that and try to build up what you are able to do. For people new to activity, you might find this guide helpful to understand where to start.

Each week, the programme will recommend how many sessions to do but you can choose how long each session lasts, depending on what is comfortable for you. You can choose when you would like to do the exercise; pick a time that suits you. **Initially you may only be able to do very short sessions, but try to gradually build this up each week.**

For each of your sessions choose either:



Try to do a variety of different activities before your treatment starts.

*Please see information at the end of the booklet to explain how to access QR Codes



Brisk walking – a type of aerobic exercise

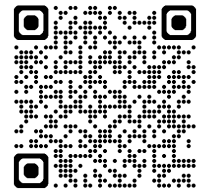
Aerobic exercise is any activity that gets your heart pumping a little faster.

Walking is a simple and free example of this, and it is an easy way to help you to become more active.

For a walking session, aim to walk at a brisk pace. This is slightly faster than normal (approximately 3 miles per hour), your breathing will be a bit deeper than usual, but you're still able to talk to someone next to you. You may not be able to go as far as you can when you're walking at your normal pace, so start off with short sessions, perhaps 5 to 10 minutes and build up gradually each week aiming for **30 minutes, 5 days a week**.

The NHS Active 10 app will allow you to track how much and how fast you have walked.

[Download Active 10 from the NHS Better Health website](#)



Home exercise videos (aerobic, strength and balance)

We are sharing a series of videos created by We Are Undefeatable. They are a movement that helps people with a range of health conditions to find ways to be active. Each video demonstrates the exercises in standing, assisted standing, and sitting positions so you can choose the version that feels most comfortable for you.

Proudly supporting

**WE ARE
UNDEFEATABLE**



Aerobic exercise

Aerobic exercise should make up the majority of your weekly activity.

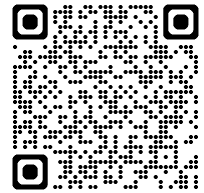
Energy/Activity video: [Energy with Alex](#)
(approximately 15 mins).



Strength exercises

Long term goal: Aim to do strengthening exercises **twice per week**.

Strength video: [Strength with Alex](#) (approximately 15mins).



Balance exercises

Long term goal: Aim to do balance exercises **twice per week**.

Balance video: [Balance with Sandra](#) (approximately 15 mins - seated, supported and unsupported exercises according to your experience and ability).



Your individual physical activity target and goal setting

The evidence has told us that for people living with colorectal cancer, there are significant health benefits from being physically active. The guidelines advise to understand your 'baseline' activity level and then gradually **increase physical activity levels from this baseline** over a six-month period, with the overall aim of increasing activity by 2.5 hours of moderate intensity activity per week.

Set weekly activity goals to help you progress to this point of being able to achieve this increase in physical activity to achieve the health benefits.

Week	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun	Aim for the week	How long was each session?	How many focused on:	How many focused on:	How many focused on:
	Tick when you have completed a session	Tick when you have completed a session	Tick when you have completed a session	Tick when you have completed a session	Tick when you have completed a session	Tick when you have completed a session	Tick when you have completed a session	Total number of sessions	Minutes	Aerobic fitness	Strength	Balance
1								2				
2								2				
3								3				
4								3				
5								4				
6								4				
7								5				
8								5				

If you are new to physical activity, tips for the length of each session:

At the start of the programme the sessions can be any length of time that feels comfortable to you, this may just be 5-10 minutes each. Every week, try to increase the length of your sessions by 5 minutes, until your sessions are 30 minutes long.

Try and complete the recommended number of sessions each week, with a mix of aerobic, strength and balance activities.

If you have an established physical activity programme, please continue with that and try to progress it if you can.

Other activities that might be helpful



Climbing stairs or stepping up and down on the bottom step

To make this harder: Perform the exercise without the support of the banister/rail



Sit to stand

Sitting on a sturdy chair, stand up straight from the chair, then slowly sit back down. Repeat.

To make this easier: Use your arms to help you push up or sit on a higher chair whilst doing the exercise.

To make this harder: Don't use your arms to help you stand, cross them over your chest whilst you complete the exercise. Hold a weight in each hand whilst you stand and sit down.



Squats

Slowly bend your knees as far as is comfortable, keeping your knees pointing forwards and your back straight. Gently come back up into standing, squeezing your buttocks as you stand up.

To make this easier: Hold onto a wall or sturdy chair whilst doing the exercise.

To make this harder: Perform the exercise without support



Wall push ups

Stand at arm's length from the wall with your feet pointing forward. Place your hands flat on the wall at the level of your chest. Slowly bend your arms, aiming to close the gap between you and the wall as much as you can. Slowly return to your starting position with your arms straight. Repeat.



Heel raises

Stand tall, holding onto a wall or sturdy chair. Lift both heels off the floor so that you take your weight onto your toes. Hold for 4 seconds and then lower your heels. Repeat.

To make this harder: Perform the exercise without support



Standing on one leg

Stand close to a wall or a sturdy support. Lift one leg so that you are balancing on one leg. Hold this position for 10 seconds and then repeat on the other side.

To make this harder: Perform the exercise without support



Bicep curls

Holding a bottle or can/tin in each hand, one arm at a time, bend each elbow so that you are bringing your hand towards your shoulder. Gently lower the arm to a straight position and then repeat on the other side

Finding physical activity services near you

Cancer Care Map is an online resource that can help you to find cancer support service in your local area. You can use this to find local and online physical activity services.



www.cancercaremap.org



Using QR codes on a mobile phone

To use a QR code on your phone to access the resources in this leaflet please follow these steps:

1. **Open your camera app:** Most smartphones can scan QR codes directly with the camera. Open the camera like you normally would for taking a photo.
2. **Point the camera at the QR code:** Hold your phone steady and aim the camera at the QR code. Make sure the code is in the centre of the screen.
3. **Wait for a link or notification:** The phone will automatically recognise the QR code and show a notification or a link.
4. **Tap the notification:** Once you see the link, tap on it to open the website or content associated with the QR code.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.stgeorges.nhs.uk

Additional services

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or care. You can contact the PALS team on the advisory telephone line and a Walk-in service is available.

Please contact PALS in advance to check if there are any changes to opening times.

PALS is based within the hospital in the ground floor main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough Wing.

Tel: 020 8725 2453 **Email:** pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

NHS UK

The NHS provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

Web: www.nhs.uk

NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobiles.



Reference: HONC_ACC_01 Published: August 2026 Review date: August 2028