



Cancer rehabilitation

What is cancer rehabilitation?

Cancer rehabilitation is a program to help people with cancer recover more quickly and more fully before, during, and after cancer treatment. It involves a group of health care professionals who work together to help people with cancer to:

- Stay as active as possible and participate in work, family, and other life roles
- Lessen the side effects and symptoms of cancer and its treatment
- Stay as independent as possible
- Improve their quality of life

What can cancer rehabilitation help with?

Physical side effects

- Pain
- Swelling
- Numbness and tingling in hands or feet (neuropathy)
- Weakness and loss of strength
- Feeling very tired (fatigue)
- Balance issues and fear of falling
- Sexual dysfunction
- Loss of appetite or upset stomach (nausea)
- Mobility problems, such as:
 - Getting off the floor or out of a chair
 - Climbing stairs
 - Showering or bathing
 - Getting dressed

You may benefit from cancer rehabilitation if you start having:

- More trouble getting around or with every day tasks
- Pain, weakness, or other symptoms
- Trouble thinking clearly

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Mental (cognitive) side effects

- Trouble multitasking
- Trouble thinking clearly or mental fogginess (brain fog)
- Memory trouble

Emotional side effects

- Stress
- Anxiety
- Depression



Which health care professionals might I see in cancer rehabilitation?

Who you see will depend on your symptoms and the challenges you're dealing with.

Problem you might have	Professional you might see
Problems or pain in your nerves, muscles, bones, and joints that change how you move and function	Physiatrists are doctors who specialize in physical rehabilitation. They may prescribe such things as injections, pain medicines, orthotic devices, or physical therapy.
Pain or trouble moving	Physical therapists (PTs) help improve movement and balance, as well as pain. Oncology PTs work specifically with people who have cancer and cancer survivors.
Trouble doing daily activities like showering, getting dressed, chores, or office work	Occupational therapists (OTs) help people adapt to everyday life. OTs also teach ways to lower the effort needed for certain tasks, which can help with fatigue.
Trouble with speech and swallowing	Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) help people with swallowing and eating after radiation therapy and chemotherapy for head and neck cancers. SLPs may also help improve memory and organization skills.
Damage to your lymphatic system from lymph node removal surgery (a common breast cancer surgery) or from radiation therapy (Your lymphatic system helps fight bacteria and infection)	Lymphedema therapists help relieve and manage swelling from a damaged lymphatic system.

Problem you might have	Professional you might see
Mental health challenges, such as stress, anxiety, or depression, or side effects like brain fog or memory problems	Psychologists can help you cope with mental health. Cognitive psychologists can help you cope with any thinking problems, like brain fog.
Problems with movement, or with social and emotional well-being	Recreational therapists use creative methods to improve physical, mental, and emotional well-being. They may use activities like arts and crafts, sports, or community outings.
Side effects such as weight loss, fatigue, and nausea.	Oncology dietitians can help make a diet plan to lower side effects. They can help people get the nutrition they need to improve their strength and energy.
Trouble with movement or exercise	Exercise physiologists help people exercise to improve their fitness.
Wanting to return to work	Career counselors support people in returning to work during or after cancer treatment.

When should I start cancer rehabilitation?

You can begin cancer rehabilitation any time before, during, or after your cancer treatment:

- **Before treatment** to prepare your body and mind for chemotherapy, radiation, or surgery, and to track you throughout your treatments to catch issues before they get serious
- **During treatment** any time you notice a change in symptoms that makes you less active or makes everyday tasks harder to do
- **After treatment** to help with long-term side effects of cancer



Talk to your doctors about cancer rehabilitation

Your symptoms can get worse if you ignore them – for example, a little bit of joint stiffness may prevent you from reaching overhead, so you use your arm less, which makes your arm weaker and stiffer over time.

If you notice a change in your symptoms, talk to your doctors so you can work to improve them.

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