# Structured three-year exercise programme cuts colon cancer recurrence and death rates



A recent international study has revealed that a structured three-year exercise programme significantly improves survival rates and reduces cancer recurrence in patients with colon cancer. The research, which involved 889 participants who had completed chemotherapy and was conducted across five countries—including Canada, Australia, the UK, Israel, and the USA—represents a significant advancement in understanding the benefits of exercise for cancer survivors.

According to the study findings, presented at the American Society of Clinical Oncology's annual meeting and published in the New England Journal of Medicine, those who participated in a coached exercise programme exhibited a 28% reduction in cancer recurrences and a 37% drop in mortality rates compared to a control group that received standard fitness and nutrition information. This is the first high-quality evidence linking structured physical activity directly to improved survival outcomes, offering a compelling alternative to previous observational studies that suggested a correlation without establishing a causal relationship.

Dr. Jeffrey Meyerhardt of the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, who was not directly involved in the study, described the results as “extremely exciting”, emphasising the study's robust design. The randomised controlled trial provides a more reliable measure of the effects of exercise than previous studies that compared active to sedentary individuals, which he noted could not definitively prove causation. Dr. Julie Gralow, chief medical officer of the American Society of Clinical Oncology, praised the research, asserting that the evidence it presents could lead to exercise coaching being integrated into standard care practice for colon cancer survivors.

The participants in the exercise group engaged with coaches bi-weekly for the first year and then monthly for the following two years. Many, like Terri Swain-Collins from Kingston, Ontario, incorporated regular walking into their routines, often finding motivation from personal interaction with their coaches. Swain-Collins stated, “This is something I could do for myself to make me feel better,” highlighting the dual benefits of emotional support and physical activity in recovery.

Over the course of eight years, those in the exercise programme not only became more active but reported better overall well-being. Despite some participants experiencing minor muscle strains, study co-author Dr. Christopher Booth noted that the programme remained a “remarkably affordable intervention” compared to the potential costs of medical treatment. The implications are profound; the research team is now analysing blood samples from participants to uncover the biological mechanisms at play—whether through improved insulin processing, immune system enhancement, or other factors.

The significance of this study cannot be overstated. Experts are increasingly advocating for the integration of structured exercise into the treatment plans of colon cancer survivors, as the evidence suggests that physical activity can not only enhance recovery but also extend life. This notion is further supported by a range of studies indicating that regular exercise can improve survival rates for cancer patients, narrowing the gap in survival between these individuals and the general population. While earlier data suggested the potential benefits of physical activity, the current research bridges the gap, allowing practitioners to advocate confidently for exercise as a crucial element of post-cancer care.

Encouragingly, this focus on physical activity aligns with growing consensus among health professionals that even modest amounts of exercise can significantly boost health outcomes. As Kerry Courneya from the University of Alberta remarked, “Now we can say definitively exercise causes improvements in survival,” signalling a pivotal shift in how cancer recovery may be approached going forward.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/health-and-wellbeing/cancer-exercise-treatment-study-b2762054.html), [[2]](https://www.apnews.com/article/9d77c2927152dfc16b717fa9cc9b9471)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/health-and-wellbeing/cancer-exercise-treatment-study-b2762054.html), [[2]](https://www.apnews.com/article/9d77c2927152dfc16b717fa9cc9b9471), [[5]](https://www.news-medical.net/news/20250224/Physical-activity-could-help-colon-cancer-survivors-match-general-population-survival-rates.aspx)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/24/health/colon-cancer-exercise-wellness/index.html), [[6]](https://www.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2025/03/more-evidence-of-power-of-exercise-in-study-of-colon-cancer-survival/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/health-and-wellbeing/cancer-exercise-treatment-study-b2762054.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.apnews.com/article/9d77c2927152dfc16b717fa9cc9b9471> - An international study has demonstrated that a structured, three-year exercise programme significantly improves survival rates and reduces cancer recurrence in colon cancer patients. Conducted across five countries with 889 participants who had completed chemotherapy, the randomised controlled trial compared an exercise coaching programme to standard fitness and nutrition information. Patients in the coached group met regularly with trainers to incorporate physical activity into their routines. Over eight years, these individuals had 28% fewer cancer recurrences and 37% fewer deaths compared to the control group. This is the first high-quality evidence linking exercise to improved cancer survival, outperforming previous observational studies. The participants also reported feeling better and more motivated through consistent coaching, with many embracing regular walking. Experts urge healthcare providers and insurers to consider integrating exercise coaching into standard care for colon cancer survivors. The study's findings, revealed at the American Society of Clinical Oncology's annual meeting and published in the New England Journal of Medicine, affirm the life-extending benefits of exercise, according to researchers. Blood samples are being analysed to uncover the biological mechanisms behind the benefits.
3. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/24/health/colon-cancer-exercise-wellness/index.html> - A recent study suggests that engaging in physical activity after a colon cancer diagnosis may help patients live longer, potentially matching or even exceeding the survival rates of those without cancer. The research analysed data from nearly 3,000 patients with colon cancer, examining their physical activity levels during and after chemotherapy. The findings indicate that regular exercise is associated with longer survival and a reduced risk of cancer recurrence. While the study is observational and cannot definitively establish causation, it underscores the potential benefits of physical activity in improving long-term outcomes for colon cancer patients. Experts highlight that even small amounts of daily physical activity can make a significant difference in health and survival.
4. <https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/exercise-may-close-survival-gap-colon-cancer-patients-2025a1000501> - Higher levels of physical activity have been found to reduce the survival disparity between patients with stage III colon cancer and matched individuals from the general population. A recent study analysed data from 2,876 patients with stage III colon cancer from two National Cancer Institute–sponsored trials. Participants reported their physical activity levels, quantified in metabolic equivalent (MET) hours per week. The study found that patients engaging in higher levels of physical activity had survival rates closer to those of the general population. However, among patients without tumour recurrence at three years, survival rates closely approached that of the general population, regardless of physical activity levels. The findings suggest that physical activity during and after treatment can help close the survival gap between colon cancer patients and the general population.
5. <https://www.news-medical.net/news/20250224/Physical-activity-could-help-colon-cancer-survivors-match-general-population-survival-rates.aspx> - A recent study indicates that higher levels of physical activity may help colon cancer survivors achieve long-term survival rates similar to those of people in the general population. The research analysed data from two post-treatment trials involving 2,875 patients with stage 3 colon cancer. Participants self-reported their physical activity levels after cancer surgery and chemotherapy. The study found that cancer survivors who were tumour-free by year three and regularly exercised achieved even better subsequent survival rates than those seen in the matched general population. This information can help patients with colon cancer understand how factors they can control—their physical activity levels—can have a meaningful impact on their long-term prognosis.
6. <https://www.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2025/03/more-evidence-of-power-of-exercise-in-study-of-colon-cancer-survival/> - Regular physical activity after treatment for stage 3 colon cancer reduces and may even eliminate disparities in survival between those with cancer and those in a general population of similar age and sex, according to new research from the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. The study suggests that exercise can have a meaningful impact on long-term survival for patients. For patients whose cancer returned, those with low activity levels had overall survival rates 50.5 percent lower than a matched general population. Previous research suggested that colon cancer patients who are more active after treatment have longer survival. In both trials, more activity was associated with improved survival rates and the benefits were seen in patients regardless of their age at the time of diagnosis. "Some exercise is better than none," says Jeffrey Meyerhardt, co-director of the Colon and Rectal Care Center at Dana-Farber and a professor at Harvard Medical School. "If you can’t get out for an hour, try 10 or 20 minutes."