



Swimming during and after Cancer

This fact sheet explains what you might need to know to support people to take part in swimming and other aquatic activities, during and after treatment for cancer.

Introduction

Regular swimming can be an excellent form of exercise for individuals during and after treatment for cancer. It can be helpful to understand more about the precautions that swimmers should be taking depending on the stage of cancer and type of treatment they may have been receiving, to help them manage their symptoms and recovery.

What is cancer?

Cancer is a group of over 200 diseases in which the cells in specific parts of our body grow uncontrollably. These cancerous cells can invade and damage healthy tissues and organs, and spread to other parts of the body. Figures suggest that 1 in 2 people in the UK will develop some form of cancer throughout their lifetime, but improvements in detection and treatment mean that more individuals are surviving for longer.

How swimming and other aquatic activities can help

We used to think that resting during and after cancer treatment was best. We now know that remaining active can help manage symptoms like pain and fatigue. Like other forms of exercise, swimming can be great for physical and mental health. Regular swimming can help improve mood, self-esteem, and sleep, and it can help reduce stress and anxiety.

Some treatments for cancer can cause symptoms such as fatigue, muscle loss or joint pain. When we exercise in water we use both upper and lower body muscles – this is a great way of improving body composition, muscle strength and fitness. For

those with joint pain, the buoyancy effect of water can reduce discomfort during exercise. Water based exercise can also help reduce any swelling from surgery or other treatments.

Having cancer doesn't mean people can't swim or exercise in water, but there are a few things that might need some consideration.

What swimmers might need to know when thinking about swimming during or after cancer treatment

Getting started

- It is important to discuss their desire to swim with their healthcare team.
- If they say it is safe to do so, it is best to start slow and gradually build up how much swimming is undertaken. This will also ensure that they don't feel too exhausted.

Swimming during and after chemotherapy

- Chemotherapy can affect the immune system. This means that their body won't be able to fight off infections as well as it should.
- So, exercising in water during chemotherapy is not advised as this could cause swimmers to become unwell from any germs in the pool.
- If someone wants to go swimming soon after chemotherapy, they should discuss this with their consultant who can tell them when your immune system has recovered sufficiently to do so.
- Be aware that they may also have a loss of feeling in their fingers/toes and may be unable to grip equipment effectively e.g. floats or noodles.

Swimming during and after radiotherapy

- Swimming in chlorinated pools is not recommended during or shortly after radiotherapy. This is because radiotherapy can cause skin changes and irritation. These changes can be further irritated by pool chemicals.
- It is advisable to shower thoroughly after being in a swimming pool, to remove excess chlorine. Swimmers should be advised to stop immediately if their skin becomes painful.
- For those who don't suffer skin changes, swimming may be possible but it is advisable to check with their consultant first and ask how to best look after their skin.

Swimming during hormone (endocrine) therapy

- Hormone therapy lowers hormone levels to help stop cancer growth. Lowering hormone levels in both men and women increases the risk of health conditions such as osteoporosis. This is where bones become weak making them more susceptible to fractures.
- Since swimming is a non-weight bearing activity, it is recommended that swimmers also engage in weight bearing activities in or out of the pool, which can help maintain bone strength.

Swimming with a peripherally inserted central catheter (PICC), Hickman central line or implantable chest port

- Swimming with a PICC or Hickman central line is not recommended due to the risk of infection and potential of dislodging the line.
- Some swimmers may be able to swim with an implantable chest port once the incision has healed and as long as no needle is in place.

Swimming after cancer surgery

- The wound must have settled before swimming. This is likely to be at least three weeks after surgery, but they should check this with their healthcare professional. They may still be advised to apply a water proof dressing.
- After surgery, some people find that they feel less fit, and joints may feel stiff. Swimming can help as the water can offer a gentle stretch to increase range of movement, and resistance to build strength.
- For certain surgeries, short term modifications may be required. For example, after surgery for breast cancer swimmers may wish to use fins (flippers) to reduce the strain on chest and arms, use a float to support the arm on the affected side, and avoid swim paddles until muscle strength and joint range is back to normal.

Swimming with a stoma/colostomy bag

Swimming with a stoma/colostomy bag may be a worry for some; but having this should not restrict them from swimming.

- Discuss any concerns and bag management with their stoma nurse.
- Test the bag out in the bath beforehand if they are nervous about it leaking or becoming detached in water
- Emptying the stoma bag shortly before entering the pool can give peace of mind that swimmer will have plenty of time before they need to empty the bag again
- Swimmers don't need to be conscious of people seeing their bag and let that stop them from swimming and having fun, different clothing can help as follows:
 - **Women:** can wear full length swimsuits, or high waisted bikini bottoms.
 - **Men:** can wear swim shorts with higher waist bands can cover the bag. Specially designed swimwear for stoma bag wearers are also available.
 - **Generally:** most pools will allow other coverings to be worn in the pool, such as t-shirts or rash vests.

Tips for swimming during and after cancer treatment

Many people have body anxieties during and following cancer treatment, it is worth ensuring them that they are not alone and suggest ways to overcome this:

Do:

- look for male or female only swimming sessions.
- look at the wide range of swimming clothing now available and choose a design that helps you feel most comfortable.

Hair loss during chemotherapy can be upsetting and stressful. Staying active is a great way to help deal with these emotions. Therefore you may suggest that swimmers consider the following:

Do:

- wear a swimming cap if they wear a wig and feel uncomfortable taking it off in public
- look for swimming sessions with other individuals with cancer or other long term health conditions.

- take care of their skin with moisturising shampoos and conditioners. Some individuals may experience a tender and itchy scalp that might worsen with the chemicals used to improve pool water quality.

Starting any exercise after cancer treatment can be daunting as they may feel tired and unfit. Some people worry and feel that they may get in the way of other faster swimmers. However, many pools have different lanes for swimming ability. So again suggest the following:

Do:

- begin in the slow lane and progress into the faster lanes as their fitness improves.
- ask their local pool about special sessions which cater for individuals of similar swimming ability.

Don't:

- overdo it on good days. Remember that their swim is only a small part of their day.

Specific tips for other disciplines

Open water swimming:

- Be aware that the outdoor environment is less controlled than a swimming pool. After surgery or treatment, swimmers may not be as strong as they were beforehand, so they should be advised to take care to adjust gradually and build back up to previous levels.
- There can be infection risks with untreated water, so again, swimmers should check with their healthcare team who will be able to advise when their immune system has recovered sufficiently for open water environments.
- Remind that any wounds from surgery should be well healed.

If you are swimming abroad

Do:

- advise them to take a copy of their prescription and take extra medication and supplies than they would normally need, in case any get lost or stolen.

Ask them to consider:

- local pool hygiene standards as these may be variable.

Additional advice

For further information:

Moving Medicine patient resources on cancer:

movingmedicine.ac.uk/consultation-guides/patient-info-finder/?p=adult&c=cancer