

Cancer & Aging

Patient Rehabilitation Guide

.....

*Brought to you by Hartford HealthCare Cancer Institute
and Hartford HealthCare Rehabilitation Network*



Introduction

Individuals aged 65 and older account for more than 50% of the U.S. population diagnosed with cancer. The overall death rate has declined in the United States and many individuals with cancer go on to live productive and fulfilling lives after diagnosis and treatment. Whether older adults are actively receiving treatment for their cancer or in a survivorship phase, basic activities may be more challenging as a result of their cancer diagnosis. Occupational and physical therapists can help facilitate recovery and improve quality of life for older adults with cancer. Patients can be treated in hospitals, rehabilitation centers or in their homes.

The therapists at Hartford HealthCare Rehabilitation Network in collaboration with the Comprehensive Oncology & Aging Care at Hartford (COACH) have designed this booklet for individuals who may have decreased ability to walk, be at risk for falling, have cancer related fatigue/ decreased endurance, chemo-induced peripheral neuropathy, chemo brain or pain. Your physician or therapist will review the topics that are applicable to your individual situation. Our goal is to educate you and to help you to achieve maximum function.

Walking Difficulty



Walking difficulty is a common, costly problem in older adults, and it contributes to loss of independence, higher rates of illness and increased mortality. You should report to your healthcare team if you have noticed any unsteadiness or difficulty walking.

Proper Walking Motion:

1. Stand up straight with your feet a comfortable space apart. Strike the ground first with you heel.
2. Roll through the step from heel to toe.
3. Push off with your toe.
4. Bring the back leg forward to strike again with the heel.

Here are a few exercises for an unsteady gait that should improve your mobility:

- **One-Foot Balancing** – Start holding onto a chair while you support your weight on just one foot. Slowly let go of the chair to balance. Try balancing for 30 seconds, and then extend your time to a minute.
- **Leg Raises** – Holding onto a chair, slowly lift one leg at least six inches off the ground to the front of you. Keep your knee straight as you do so. Repeat this several times, and then lift your leg to the side and to the back.
- **Heel Raises** – Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart. Holding onto a chair, slowly rise up on your toes, and then lower back down. Repeat ten or more times.
- **“Tightrope” Walking** – Walk in a straight line across the room, putting one foot directly in front of the other like you’re walking a tightrope.



Don't be afraid of using a walking aid to get around if you truly need it. Continue trying to build strength in your lower limbs and keep walking.

Safety Tips for Using Your Cane



You may find it helpful to use a cane if you have a problem with balance or instability.

- Hold the cane in the hand opposite the side that needs support.
- The top of your cane should reach to the crease in your wrist when you stand up straight.
- Your elbow should be bent slightly when you hold your cane.

Safety Tips for Using Your Walker



- Keep your walker with you **AT ALL TIMES**.
- To Stand, push up using your legs and arms on the chair (**DON'T use the walker to pull yourself up from the chair**); once standing **THEN** it is safe to hold onto the walker (the walker is not stable to pull up on and this could cause you to fall).
- **ALWAYS** walk with your body inside the walker. You do not want your toes to be in front of the front wheel/leg or behind the back wheel/leg. Do not leave the walker to reach out to the side. It will not protect you if you are not using it!
- Turn your walker with you at the same time you turn your body.
- When you return to your seat, back all the way up to your chair bringing the walker with you. Back up until your legs touch the chair. Reach back for the chair before you sit. **DON'T hold onto the walker!**

The Risk of Falling



The risk of falling is a common problem seen in older adults. Injuries from falls are one of the most serious health risks for people over the age of 65. In fact, more than one third of adults 65 and older fall each year in the United States.

One alarming statistic is that falls cause over 95% of broken hips in the older population. 40% of individuals hospitalized for hip fractures are unable to return to independent living.

The good news is that some falls are preventable. Falls caused by environmental factors such as cluttered rooms or poorly lit walkways, as well as falls from the side effects of medication can be avoided.

Tips for Reducing the Risks for Falls



Cancer treatment can cause side effects like dehydration, low blood counts, and fatigue which can increase the risk of falling.

You can:

- Exercise regularly – programs like Tai Chi and yoga will improve strength, flexibility, and balance.
- Use a walker or cane for increased stability if indicated by your physician or therapist
 - Wear supportive shoes with good soles
 - Do not rely on furniture or walls for balance
 - Avoid quick/sudden movements or turns
 - Use hand rails when going up and down stairs.
- Ask your physician or pharmacist to review your prescription and over-the-counter medications to reduce side effects and interactions.
- Have your eyes checked by an eye doctor at least once a year.
- Reduce hazards in your home by making simple modifications, such as improved lighting.
- Reduce the amount of reaching overhead or toward the floor.
- Sit in chairs with arm rests to facilitate easy standing
- When getting up from a lying position, take your time, get up slowly to avoid feeling dizzy which can increase the chance of falling.

Consult your physician and/or a physical or occupational therapist if you have questions or concerns regarding your risk for falls.

Medication Safety Tips



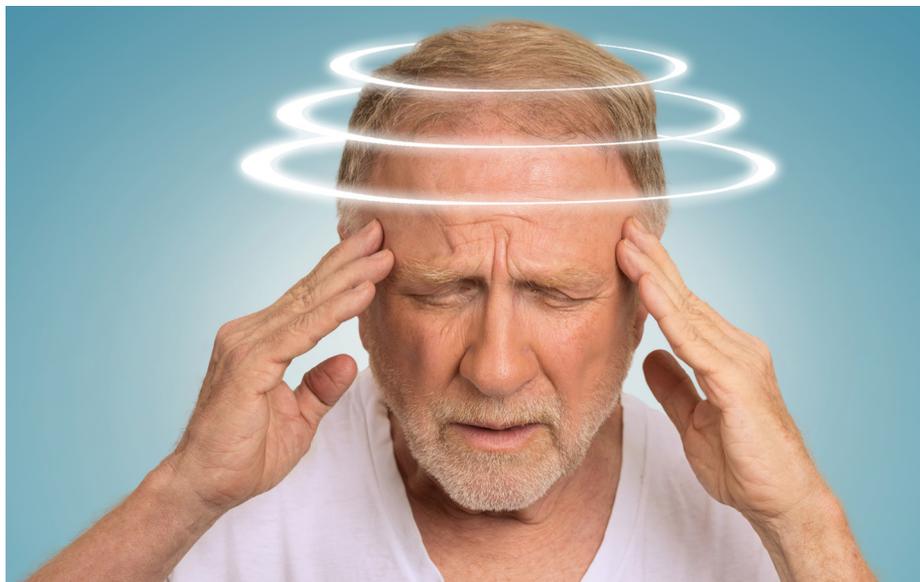
Medication Risks

- Taking 5 or more medications on a regular basis including all prescriptions, over-the-counter, and herbal medications.
- Drug-drug interactions and drug-food interactions are common and could be serious. It is important to review these with your pharmacist or provider.

Medication Checklist

- Purchase all of your medication at one pharmacy.
- Ask your physician before taking any over-the-counter medication, especially allergy, herbal, sleep or cold medication.
- Contact your physician if you experience any dizziness, weakness, confusion, fatigue, poor appetite, or unsteadiness.
- Keep an up-to-date medication list with the names, doses and times you take each medication. Be sure to include diagnosis, prescriptions, over-the-counter and herbal medications.
- Bring your medication list to every visit with your physician. Ask your physician if any of your medications can be reduced or discontinued.
- Never stop taking any medication without first speaking with your physician.
- Do not reuse old medication bottles.

Tips to Manage Dizziness



Dizziness and imbalance are one of the most common complaints among older people.

- Report any symptoms of dizziness or lightheadedness to your physician.
- Clench your fists and pump your ankles 10 times before getting up.
- Change positions slowly and stand for several seconds before walking.
- Never walk when you feel dizzy.
- Ask your healthcare provider to take your blood pressure after lying down for 5 minutes and again as soon as you stand up.
- Drink eight glasses of water each day, unless you have been advised to limit the amount of fluids that you drink.
- Sleeping medication, cold and allergy medications can cause dizziness.

Combating Cancer-Related Fatigue

• •

Cancer-related fatigue (CRF) is one of the most common side effects of cancer and its treatments (surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy). Usually, it comes on suddenly, does not result from activity or exertion, and is not relieved by rest or sleep. It may continue even when treatment is completed. It's important to discuss fatigue with your provider as sometimes it can be treatable.

Tips to feel your best before, during and after treatment include:

Plan Ahead:

- Determine the best time to do certain activities. For example, if the evening is the most difficult time for you, do as much as you can earlier in the day.
- Accomplish difficult tasks by spreading them out throughout the week.
- Arrange work areas close together. Rearrange tools or equipment so work moves in one direction.
- Organize activities and try to do them all the same way every time. Repeating the process will improve your efficiency and save you energy.

Pace yourself:

- Moderate pace is better than rushing through activities. Do the harder part of any activity while breathing out.
- Rest before fatigue sets in and take naps or rest periods during the day.

Reduce the effort needed to do a job:

- Try to sit for as many activities as possible in a chair with good support to aid in good posture.
- Store frequently used items on easy to reach cabinet or refrigerator shelves (this is usually the height between your shoulders and waist).

- If cooking, prepare enough food for at least two meals then freeze extras.
- Use a cart or rolling device to move items.
- Slide items instead of carrying them.

Stress management:

- Adjust your expectations.
- Practice relaxation techniques such as meditation or belly breathing, which can reduce stress and decrease fatigue.
- Belly breathing: Sitting or lying down place one hand on your chest and your other hand on your belly; inhale through your nose seeing your belly rise first and exhale out through your mouth for 5-10 cycles.



Exercise:

- Make sure to check with your healthcare team before proceeding with any exercise.
- Start slowly. Even if you can only do an activity for a few minutes a day it will help you. Try short periods of exercise with frequent rest breaks. For example, walk briskly for a few minutes, slow down, and walk briskly again, until you have done 30 minutes of brisk activity. You can divide the activity into three 10-minute sessions, if you need to. You'll still get the benefit of the exercise.
- Exercise as you are able. It is very important to listen to your body and rest when you need to.

How Else Rehabilitation Can Help



Chemotherapy-induced Peripheral Neuropathy (CIPN):

CIPN is another side effect of cancer treatment that can impede an older adult’s participation in daily tasks, especially if it is coupled with arthritis which is a common condition in aging. Some chemotherapy drugs can cause peripheral neuropathy (numbness, tingling, pain, sensitivity to cold in the hands and feet) caused by damage to the nerves.

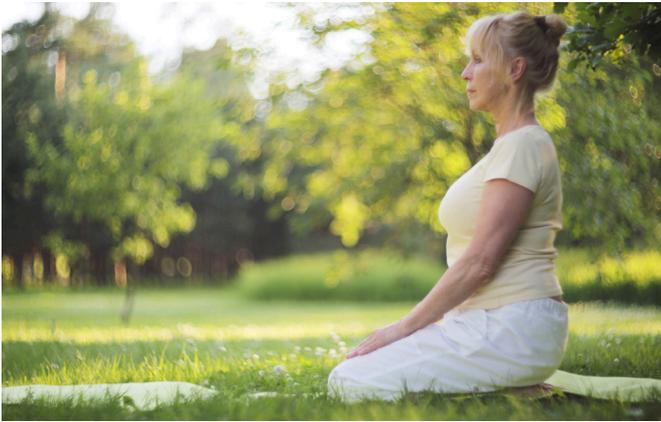
Physical and occupational therapists often work together to help patients manage symptoms and regain function. Physical therapy includes exercises to improve balance and gait. Assistive devices and orthotics may be recommended to aid in walking and prevent falls. Occupational therapy includes exercises to improve fine motor skills, dexterity, and coordination. It may also include strategies to decrease the risk of falls, cuts, and burns at home. Physical and occupational therapists may use hands-on treatments to reduce nerve constriction, improve joint mobility, and increase lymphatic flow.

For Cognitive Function:

Occupational therapists and Speech therapists are skilled in treating cognitive problems, which can begin for many older adults after receiving chemotherapy. “Chemo brain” causes individuals with cancer to feel like they are in a mental fog, with decreased ability to remember details, difficulty to concentrate, and slower thought processing. Because cognitive abilities do slow down with normal aging processes, the impact of chemo brain can be more serious for older adults. Occupational or Speech therapy sessions to combat chemo brain will be aimed at structuring routines with planners, calendars, and journals as well as cognitive exercises such as memory training, puzzles, workbooks and complex problem-solving.

For Pain:

Physical Therapists can help older adults with pain management. Therapeutic modalities such as heat, ice, soft-tissue mobilization, and gentle stretching can facilitate joint range and comfort in older adults with cancer, enabling them to get through their daily routines.



Posture:

Posture exercises for seniors can go a long way toward minimizing the risk of falling. Exercises to improve posture can also have a major impact on quality of life.

Good posture is important because it helps to distribute weight evenly, reducing the strain on muscles and ligaments. It helps reduce the risk of injury to the spine, and it helps your body to conserve energy.

Proper posture can also reduce the risk of suffering from joint pain. It promotes flexibility in the ligaments that support your bones. This also helps you stay balanced so you don't fall.

One exercise is called, simply enough, the shoulder squeeze. The first thing you do is stand up straight, keeping your feet spaced about the width of your hips. Then picture squeezing a tennis ball between the shoulder blades.

Squeeze your shoulder blades together, hold for 5 seconds and then relax. Do 10 repetitions. Repeat 1-3 sets of 10. 1x/day.

When to Seek Rehabilitation Services:

You may benefit from a referral to physical or occupational rehabilitation if you have:

- Weakness
- Fatigue
- Difficulty with ADLs
- Pain
- Decreased Balance/Gait
- Decreased Function
- Neuropathies
- Loss of Range of Motion
- Cognitive Problems/Chemo Brain

Interventions Offered by Rehabilitation Services:

- Balance and Gait training
- Tips for Reducing Fall Risk
- Soft Tissue Mobilization/Pain management
- Postural Correction/training
- Diaphragmatic Breathing
- Energy Conservation
- Cognitive Exercises

