



Healthy Habits for Life

A programme for staying well after cancer



**Good for you,
good for everyone**



Simple steps to better health after cancer

Small lifestyle changes can make a real difference to your recovery from cancer. A healthy lifestyle can reduce the after-effects of some cancer treatments, such as tiredness and depression, and prevent other diseases like heart disease and diabetes, and may reduce the chance of your cancer coming back.

Only actions that have good scientific evidence of a link with cancer or for improving the general health of people who have been diagnosed with cancer have been included in this booklet.

Make it automatic

Latest evidence shows that you'll find it easier to make permanent lifestyle changes by turning actions into habits; things you do without even thinking about it.

The easiest way is to integrate your new actions into your existing routines – taking your walk straight after lunch, or always adding fruit to your cereal for example. You will then automatically associate the moment with your new action (See page 22 or visit www.ulc.ac.uk/healthy-habits for more information on habits).

Introduce these small changes to your day and repeat them often (maybe 30 to 60 times) and they will become second nature.



“After cancer it can take a while to feel right again. It may require some lifestyle changes, and some compromises, but progress comes with time. Life can be just as, if not more, rewarding than before.”

- David, diagnosed with colorectal cancer

Get started now

1. Choose the goals you would like to work on
2. Book your call with one of the ASCOT mentors
3. Fill in the Step-by-Step chart (in the back of the booklet)

	I do this already	I want to change		
Active, every day – for 30 minutes or more	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		page 6
Getting stronger and fitter – for those who can do a bit more	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		page 8
Up your fruit and veg – 5 portions or more a day	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		page 10
Max your fibre – go for wholegrain choices	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		page 11
Watch out for high calorie foods and drinks – reduce your fat and sugar	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		page 12
Reduce red meat – cut your portion sizes and have it less often	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		page 14
Cut out processed meat – go for fish or nuts instead	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		page 15
Quit smoking – it's the best thing you can do	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		page 16
Cut back on alcohol – a couple of small drinks a day max and some days alcohol free	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		page 18

Making your changes stick

Once you've decided which lifestyle changes you need to make, start taking the small steps that will get you there. Side effects from cancer and cancer treatment often make it difficult to find the motivation to make these changes. Take it gently - don't be cross with yourself if you are struggling.

✓ Fill in the Step-by-Step chart

Decide what you want to change and write it down on the chart (you could pick up to four ideas at first).

✓ Think it through

Think about how and when you'll make your changes - it's easier to link an action to a situation than a specific time. Having a quick walk before breakfast or eating a salad with lunch for example.

✓ Plan in advance

Think about what you need to do in advance, whether that's buying in fruit, getting some low-alcohol beers or booking an exercise class. Use the Healthy life action plan to record what you'll do and tick off each activity you complete.



“When the treatment is over, it's a natural time to reassess your diet, lifestyle and other things”

- Sheryl, diagnosed with breast cancer



“Anything that gives you a marginal benefit is something you've got to consider”

- Brian, diagnosed with prostate cancer

✓ Reward yourself

Treat yourself with rewards that make you feel good - maybe a massage, new book, or trip to the cinema or theatre.

✓ Keep at it

Repeating the same actions each day helps make them second nature. It can take a while for a new action to become automatic so stick with it!

✓ Next steps

Once you've made your first few changes part of your routine, think about the things you can do next.

A healthy lifestyle is only one aspect of your wellbeing. Make sure you are getting all the support you need. See the back cover for advice on where to seek emotional support if you need it.

For more about the impact of making changes, the science of habits, and some frequently asked questions see pages 20 to 23.

Active, every day

Being active has a positive effect on your hormone levels and immune function. It can increase muscle and bone strength and reduce fatigue. It may reduce the chance of some cancers returning.

Being physically active is good for you. Sitting for a long time is bad for you.

Experts recommend

Avoid being sedentary by moving around for 2 minutes out of every 20 minutes sitting down. If possible set reminders to get up at regular intervals.

Aim for **150 minutes of moderate activity a week** (including brisk walking, cycling or anything that makes you feel warm and breathe faster).

Increasing the number of steps you take every day helps meet this activity target. **Experts recommend 10,000 steps a day, but even 1,000 more steps help.** Use a pedometer or app on your phone to help measure this.

“Being physically active is important for anyone who has been diagnosed with cancer. Evidence is increasing to suggest physical activity can improve overall health and quality of life. If people are not used to regular activity they should begin slowly and build up gradually.”

Dr John Bridgewater, Consultant in Medical Oncology

“My legs do ache quite badly, but I’m just going to keep trying”

- Angela, diagnosed with breast cancer



“I started off very slowly. First walking 50 yards, then 100 yards, then around the garden”

- Paul, diagnosed with bowel cancer

Ideas for everyday change

Small changes can bring activity into your day. Take a moment to think about your day. **What might work for you?**

Do you go to work or leave the house regularly?

- ▶ Try walking part or all of the way – get off the bus a stop early.
- ▶ Get a pedometer to measure your daily steps. Or if you use a smartphone, download a free app like ‘Pacer’.
- ▶ Swap the lift for a couple of flights of stairs.
- ▶ Try standing on public transport.

Could you change your routines?

- ▶ Try a bike ride or a walk at lunchtime.
- ▶ Team up with a friend to walk regularly or join a local walking group.

Could you avoid long periods of sitting?

- ▶ Use TV ad breaks to walk around or do some light chores.
- ▶ Have a walk around the room every time you have a cup of tea.



Write down the ideas that might work for you

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Now use the action plan sheets in the back pocket



See the back cover and our website, www.ulc.ac.uk/healthy-habits, for ideas. Including accessible walking trails for if you use a wheelchair.

Getting stronger and fitter

If you feel you can do a bit more, building up to more energetic exercise and adding in some strength training will increase your fitness and with it the benefits to health.

A cancer diagnosis and treatments can make people less active and cause muscle fitness to decline. By doing fitness and strength exercises, you can reverse some of this weakness, keep your muscles and bones strong, and you will be able to go about your daily activities more easily.

Through balance and stretching exercises you can reduce your risk of falls and fractures, and increase your flexibility. They may also help you relax.



Exercise and fatigue

Fatigue can make exercising feel very difficult. In the long run, exercise can help reduce fatigue, but this will take time. Be patient and just try to keep doing things little by little.

Experts recommend

Do exercises that cover **strength, balance and stretching at least twice a week**. Talk to your doctor before you begin and build up slowly.

When you feel able to, try to incorporate at least **two 30-minute sessions of vigorous exercise** into your week (jogging, fast swimming, riding a bike uphill, or playing a team sport). If you're exercising at this level you'll be breathing hard and will struggle to talk without pausing for breath.

For ideas on exercises right for you, visit www.ucl.ac.uk/healthy-habits or talk to your ASCOT advisor.

"If exercise were a pill, it would be one of the most cost-effective drugs ever invented."

Dr Nick Cavill, a health promotion consultant

Ideas for everyday change

Would you enjoy some of these more energetic options?

How could you fit them into your daily routine?

How about joining a class?

- ▶ Whether it's aqua-aerobics or Zumba, there are lots of fitness class options including ones that focus on strength and flexibility, such as pilates.
- ▶ Use an exercise DVD, a YouTube class, or a fitness app.

Is there a new activity you could try?

- ▶ Try yoga or Tai Chi which can also help with anxiety, depression and stress.
- ▶ Sign up for a 5k run and follow a training programme to help you reach your goal - start with fast walking and build up slowly to jogging.
- ▶ Swimming is good all-round exercise, especially if you have joint problems.

Fancy trying a gym?

- ▶ Your GP may provide exercise on prescription so you can use a gym for free.



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Up your fruit and veg

Fruit and veg are packed full of antioxidants – the chemicals that help prevent the cell damage that is linked to cancer. There are thousands of different types of antioxidants, and we don't know about them all yet; a good reason why supplements can't replace healthy eating.

Experts recommend

Five or more portions of fruit and vegetables each day - mostly veg. (A portion is equal to one medium-sized piece of fruit such as an apple, three tablespoons of veg, or a handful of smaller fruits).

Vegetables should take up at least one third of your plate at meal times

Ideas for everyday change

Could you add more fruit and vegetables into your day?

Think about your usual diet. What might work for you?

What do you have for breakfast?


- ▶ Try adding a banana, berries or dried fruit.
- ▶ Try having an apple or similar after every breakfast.

Do you eat snacks?

- ▶ Prepare bite-sized veg (carrots, cucumber, cherry tomatoes), fresh or dried fruit in the morning and take them with you.

What do you eat for lunch or dinner?

- ▶ Add a side salad or vegetables.
- ▶ Make fruit your pudding every day.
- ▶ Team cherry tomatoes or vegetable sticks with a light meal.
- ▶ Add one extra vegetable to every casserole, soup or pasta dish.

 Write down the ideas that might work for you

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Now use the action plan sheets in the back pocket

Max your fibre

Fibre can stop the growth of cancer cells and cause them to die off. It also increases the speed that food passes through the gut, reducing exposure to any harmful chemicals.

Bowel surgery or radiation near the bowel can mean that you are more sensitive to some foods, especially those high in fibre. Adapt the ideas below to suit you, and see our FAQs on page 21.

Experts recommend

Increasing fibre in your diet by adding fruit, vegetables and pulses (beans and lentils) to meals. Aiming for a portion of high fibre or wholegrain starchy foods at every meal. They should make up at least one third of your plate at meal times.

Ideas for everyday change

Think about the food you eat each day. **Which refined foods could you swap for a wholegrain version?**

What do you have for breakfast?


- ▶ Change your cereal to a wholegrain version, muesli or porridge.
- ▶ Change your bread (white or brown) for wholemeal or granary.

What do you eat for lunch or dinner?

- ▶ Add a portion of pulses such as beans or peas, to salads, casseroles, stews, and soups.

Do you eat pasta, rice, noodles, bread or potatoes?

- ▶ Swap for wholegrain versions (brown rice, wholemeal pasta & noodles).
- ▶ Keep the skin on potatoes and sweet potatoes.

 Write down the ideas that might work for you

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Watch out for high calorie foods and drinks

A healthy weight is associated with a lower risk of some cancers returning and is associated with better survival rates for breast, colorectal and prostate cancer. It will also help reduce your chance of getting diabetes or heart disease.

Having too many high calorie foods and drinks (usually those containing lots of fat and sugar), means you're more likely to gain excess weight.

These foods are often high in salt too, which can damage the lining of the stomach and raise your blood pressure.

Experts recommend

Limit the number of high calorie food you eat and avoid sugary drinks. Fruit juice should be limited to one small glass a day too.

Use food labels – including the food 'traffic light system' – to help choose foods that are lower in sugar, fat and salt. Aim for foods that are mainly 'green' and 'amber'.

Avoid 'comfort eating'- If you find this is something you struggle with, finding things to distract you from wanting to eat may help (phone a friend, go for a walk, or do a crossword puzzle).



"In terms of lifestyle and eating, there's a bit more purpose to it now, a bit more thought process as to why"

- Mike, diagnosed with colorectal cancer



Ideas for everyday change

Think about the food you eat each day.

Could you swap out a few high calorie foods for some low fat and sugar-free options?

What do you eat for breakfast?

- ▶ Choose a breakfast cereal with less added sugar, and don't add your own.
- ▶ Have semi-skimmed milk instead of full-fat and swap to a low-fat spread.

What do you eat for lunch or dinner?

- ▶ Choose low-fat sandwich fillings such as chicken or fish and skip the mayonnaise.
- ▶ Drink water instead of juice or sugary drinks.
- ▶ Have fruit for pudding.
- ▶ Bake, grill or steam food instead of frying. Avoid chips or oven-cook them.
- ▶ Have lean cuts of meat and remove any fat.
- ▶ Avoid, or at least limit, ready meals and takeaways, many of which are high in calories.



Write down the ideas that might work for you

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Now use the action plan sheets in the back pocket

Reduce red meat

Cutting down on red meat may help prevent recurrence or another primary cancer. This is because red meat contains harmful chemicals, which can damage the cells lining the bowel and cause cancer.

The high fat content of some red meats can also cause heart disease.

Experts recommend

Limit red meat (beef, lamb, pork and goat) to no more than 500g (approx. 18oz) across the week. A medium portion of meat is about 90g (3oz) - the size of a pack of playing cards.


Although there are harmful chemicals in red meat, there doesn't appear to be an increased risk of cancer if you stick to **small quantities**. As part of a balanced diet, **red meat is a good source of nutrients**.

Ideas for everyday change

How often do you eat red meat?

How could you reduce the amount you eat?

- ▶ Have red meat no more than once or twice a week.
- ▶ Replace red meat with chicken or fish (fresh or tinned but not too much smoked due to the salt content).
- ▶ Substitute half of the meat in casseroles and stews with pulses such as lentils or chickpeas.
- ▶ Try other meat alternative such as Quorn, tofu or eggs.
- ▶ Go vegetarian at least once or twice a week.
- ▶ Search out new recipes that don't contain meat.

 Write down the ideas that might work for you

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Now use the action plan sheets in the back pocket

Cut out processed meat

Processed meats (ham, bacon, salami, chorizo, corned beef, and sausages) are associated with bowel, prostate and stomach cancer. This is because the smoking, curing or salting process can form cancer-causing substances (carcinogens).

Experts recommend

Eat as little processed meat as possible. There's no real nutritional need to eat processed meats so choose white meat, fish or nuts instead.

Ideas for everyday change



Think about the meals you eat each day and the healthier options you could try. Are processed meats a part of your diet?

What do you have for breakfast?


- ▶ If you enjoy the traditional English breakfast leave out bacon and swap to vegetarian sausages or mushrooms.

What about lunch?

- ▶ Swap the ham in your sandwich for white meat, fish, eggs or a vegetarian option.

What about dinner?

- ▶ Avoid pepperoni and salami meat toppings on pizzas, try spicy chicken instead or add chilli for extra punch.
- ▶ Replace sausages with vegetarian options, fish or chicken.
- ▶ Instead of burgers, try veggie burgers, falafels or fish cakes

 Write down the ideas that might work for you

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Now use the action plan sheets in the back pocket

Quit smoking

Smoking is the leading preventable cause of cancer in the UK, and is associated with cancer recurrence. If you smoke, quitting is the single best thing you can do to improve your health.

Tobacco smoke contains more than 70 different cancer-causing substances. These chemicals enter your lungs and spread around the rest of your body damaging cells.

Quitting smoking successfully

Here are seven simple steps to help you go smoke free:

1. Speak to a trained and certified stop-smoking advisor. Find one through your GP, or go to www.nhs.uk/smokefree
2. Use a nicotine patch plus one of the faster acting nicotine products. Speak to your doctor about prescription medication and make sure you use it for at least 6 to 8 weeks as directed.
3. Set a definite date and time to stop. Avoid having even a puff on a cigarette from that point onwards.
4. Try to avoid situations that are usually associated with smoking.
5. Avoid drinking alcohol; it can increase your desire to smoke.
6. Practice changing the way you think about yourself – imagine you are a non-smoker: “I do not smoke and smoking is not an option”.
7. Don’t worry about putting on weight at first. If you eat healthily and keep active, any weight gain is likely to be small and temporary.

A recent study suggests smoking doubles the risk of prostate cancer recurring.

Experts recommend

Stop smoking and the health benefits begin immediately. If you smoke, doctors recommend you make quitting your first change.



“It's hard for people having been diagnosed with cancer. Fortunately there are lots of stop-smoking services that we can refer people to.”
Consultant breast surgeon

Ideas for everyday change – to go alongside these steps

Think about changes to your routine.

What would make stopping easier for you?

Do people smoke around you?

- ▶ Ask people to avoid smoking near you.
- ▶ Ask people not to leave their cigarettes out.
- ▶ Make sure people around you know not to offer you a cigarette.

What triggers make you want to smoke?

- ▶ If you smoke at the end of the meal, try something else, perhaps going for a quick walk.
- ▶ If stress makes you want to smoke, have a plan to deal with it, such as talking to a friend.



Write down the ideas that work for you

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Now use the action plan sheets in the back pocket



Cut back on alcohol

Alcohol damages cells and prevents them from repairing themselves. It also raises the levels of some hormones linked to cancerous growths. This might result in an effect on cancer recurrence.

Although there are short-term pleasures in alcohol, excess intake can also affect weight and sleep. And in the longer term alcohol is a depressant, so cutting back could lighten your mood.

You might not feel you're a big drinker but the number of units of alcohol can easily add up – so it's worth taking a moment to count the number of drinks you've had in the past week.

Experts recommend

If you drink, have no more than 2 to 3 units of alcohol a day for women and 3 to 4 units per day for men.

Try to have at least two alcohol-free days each week.



Standard glass of 12% wine (175ml)
2.1 units



Large Glass of 12% wine (250ml)
3 units



Bottle of alcopop (275ml)
2.7 units



Double standard shot of spirits (50ml)
2 units



Pint of 5% strength beer or cider
3 units



Bottle of beer or cider (330ml)
1.7 units



“Now I just enjoy a glass of wine on high days and holidays - less than once a week usually”

- Keith, diagnosed with prostate and colorectal cancer

Ideas for everyday change

Try to cut your alcohol consumption by stopping completely, drinking less frequently, or drinking smaller amounts.

Which of these ideas might work for you?

Do you drink when you're out?

- ▶ Have smaller measures or dilute your drinks.
- ▶ Choose non-alcoholic versions or lower strength options.
- ▶ Quench your thirst with a large glass of water first and alternate alcoholic drinks with water.

Do you drink at home?

- ▶ Remove temptation by putting the wine bottle away after pouring a glass. (Use a vacuum stopper to keep it fresh).
- ▶ Keep some weekdays alcohol-free.
- ▶ Use a small wine glass or a kitchen measuring-jug to learn about exact measures (eg a 175ml glass of wine).

Do you drink more in some situations?

- ▶ Think about the places, situations and people that encourage you to drink most and consider other non-alcoholic drinks.
- ▶ Before going out, make a plan for how to avoid drinking more than you mean to.
- ▶ If you drink when you feel stressed, look for new ways to relieve pressure, maybe going for a walk, chatting to a friend or watching your favourite TV programme.



Write down the ideas that work for you

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Will these changes reduce the risk of my cancer returning?

There is growing evidence that healthy living can help to prevent cancer recurrence or development of a second cancer.

For example, combined findings from 6 studies of more than 12,000 women diagnosed with breast cancer showed that being active after a cancer diagnosis reduced the risk of the cancer returning by 24%. A study in patients with colorectal cancer showed that those who were more physically active after diagnosis had a much reduced risk of their cancer returning. Many studies also suggest a large number of health benefits of physical activity after a prostate cancer diagnosis.

All the ideas for lifestyle changes will help you to be healthier and more likely to feel better, but cannot guarantee that you do not become ill again.

Other benefits

In addition, turning these actions into regular habits will help to reduce your risk of other long-term health problems, including:

- ▶ Heart problems
- ▶ Osteoporosis (thinning of the bones) and fractures (breaks)
- ▶ High blood pressure
- ▶ High cholesterol levels
- ▶ Diabetes.

For more information on the science behind the recommendations see www.ucl.ac.uk/healthy-habits

Other frequently asked questions

Isn't it too late to make these kinds of changes?

The evidence suggests that it's never too late to start. For example research suggests regular physical activity can help to improve survival even in people who weren't particularly active before their diagnosis.

What if I'm already doing these things?

You might find that you are already doing some of the healthy choices here. That's great, but there could still be ways you can do more of them. For example, if you already walk 10,000 steps a day, you could try increasing this to 15,000. Your ASCOT advisor will be able to help you think about this.

What if I slip?

Everyone will have days where things don't go to plan. This may be because you are experiencing difficult side-effects from your treatment, or for other reasons. The important thing is not to give up and not to punish yourself for having an off day. Just try to get back to your plan as soon as possible and move forward from there.

Following my treatment, I am more sensitive to certain foods, especially those high in fibre. How do I increase my fibre intake without causing a flare up?

If your treatment has affected your bowel, you will need to be guided by your body and any medical advice. Experiment with different varieties of food – try a mixture of white and wholemeal bread, or plain wholemeal or oatmeal bread, rather than wholegrain. Keep a record of any 'trigger' foods that cause flare-ups for you and see if you can find alternatives. These can vary from person to person.

Are there any special precautions I should take when exercising?

Some effects of treatment may increase the risk for exercise-related problems.

If you were not active before diagnosis, you should start with low-intensity activities and then slowly increase your activity level. Speak to your doctor before trying any vigorous exercise.

For more questions and answers visit www.ucl.ac.uk/healthy-habits, or ask your ASCOT advisor.

The science of habits

A habit is an action you do without thinking about it: tying your shoelaces or brushing your teeth.

Habits can affect your health. For example, always taking the stairs instead of the lift can increase your fitness levels.

Habits are formed when you do an action over and over again in the same place or at the same time. Recent research shows if you create a new 'healthy' habit you are more likely to continue this action over the long-term.

Actions that you can fit into your existing routines are usually easier to turn into a habit. Actions that require more commitment, such as regularly attending group sessions, may take longer.

Research suggests that:

- ▶ The time it takes to turn a new action into a habit varies between people and between types of action. It can be as little as three weeks, although for others it can be two months.
- ▶ 'When you are starting out, forgetting to do your new action is quite normal. If you pick it up and continue to practice, you can still turn the action into a habit. **The key is not to give up!**

The ASCOT programme

Thank you for taking part in ASCOT, a research programme exploring healthy lifestyle habits for people recovering from cancer, created by University College London with funding from Cancer Research UK. For more information on the programme, and for references to the research, visit www.ucl.ac.uk/healthy-habits

Making it easier to form a new habit

Creating a new habit is not always easy, but research has shown there are some techniques you can use that will make it easier for you to change your behaviour:

1. Write down your goal
2. Plan how and when you will do your chosen new action
3. Monitor your progress towards your goal
4. Reward yourself for the progress you have made.

Use the cards in the pocket to fill in the four steps

Healthy Habits for Life

World Cancer Research Fund:

Providing you with the information and tools you need to enjoy a healthy lifestyle

www.wcrf-uk.org/uk/here-help/resources

Cancer Research UK: For support and information about cancer and living a healthy lifestyle **www.cancerresearchuk.org/cancer-info/healthyliving/**

Macmillan: Advice to help you cope with the emotional, relationship or health issues you might face during and after cancer treatment **www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/index.html**

Walk 10,000 steps: NHS 10,000 steps a day **www.nhs.uk/Livewell/loseweight/pages/10000stepschallenge.aspx**

Walking for Health:
www.walkingforhealth.org.uk

Local information for you: Look online or get information at your library about local walking groups and fitness classes

Walking more locally:
Try Urban Route planner **www.walkit.com**

Accessible trails for wheelchair users:
www.walkswithwheelchairs.com

Alcohol: **www.nhs.uk/livewell/alcohol**

Nutrition: Resources to support you in your healthy eating changes, visit **www.nhs.uk/livewell/healthy-eating/**

Quit smoking: Use professional support to help you quit, visit **www.nhs.uk/smokefree**

