

Diet and Physical Activity After Breast Cancer

To improve survivorship after breast cancer, find your route to self-care. The experts at AICR can help guide you.

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To improve survivorship after breast cancer, trying to find the “right” steps can feel so overwhelming that you consider simply tuning out, but there’s another approach. Rather than chasing down every book, interview and article you encounter, turn to a solid source with experts who have sifted through the best evidence to show you options that make the most sense. The American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) does just that, providing recommendations and reports not just based on the latest study in the headlines, but all the best available evidence from overall research.

Think of it this way: When you want help finding your way to some new address in your city or to a far-away destination, instead of just rambling around, you might use an app on your phone or other technology to see suggested routes. In the same way, AICR’s careful assessment of research helps you avoid unwanted detours and distractions, while showing you different options for lifestyle choices that can all help you protect your health.

The good news: research does show paths to lower risk of breast cancer and better outcomes after a breast cancer diagnosis. And there’s not just one single route that all women must follow in exactly the same way. The evidence leaves room for women to navigate these paths in ways that make sense for them.

Eating Habits: Not the Best Diet, the Best Diet for You

Include nutrient-rich plant foods like vegetables, fruits, whole grains and pulses (like dry beans and lentils) throughout each day’s eating. Eating like this lowers your risk of cancer and helps protect heart health, too.

- Fiber: When you eat a wide range of these plant foods, you get [several types of fiber](#), each protecting your health in different ways. Some types support a healthy gut microbiome

(bacteria living in your gut) that may help avoid chronic inflammation, while other types of fiber help limit blood sugar rise after meals and thus insulin levels, reduce levels of estrogen or promote heart health.

- **Phytochemicals:** A variety of plant foods means you get different vitamins and minerals, and also natural plant compounds (phytochemicals), each offering help for cell signaling and other processes that keep cells healthy. The bonus: by including these plant foods throughout the day (not just at a “healthy” dinner), you keep these health protectors circulating all day long.
- **Soy foods:** Don’t be afraid of foods like tofu, tempeh, edamame and soy nuts. Some women, particularly after estrogen-sensitive breast cancer, are afraid that the isoflavone compounds in soy foods pose risk. But the fear-inducing rumors that keep circulating on the Internet were [debunked](#) years ago. Now research shows that soy foods promote heart health without breast cancer-related risk. In fact, soy food consumption is associated with fewer deaths from all causes combined among breast cancer survivors.

Don’t get detoured: Click-bait headlines can leave you fretting about whether plant-focused eating habits, without restricting yourself to eating only plant foods, is enough. But the overall body of research supports a range of eating patterns in which plant foods fill most of the plate.

- Only [organic](#)? If you’ve been choosing organic foods out of fear that conventionally grown foods pose risk, fear not. Eating more of all kinds of minimally processed plant foods is the choice that best protects health, research shows.
- The [alkaline diet](#) advocated by some sources to deter cancer by changing your body’s pH is not supported by overall research in humans. It involves more than simply eating more vegetables; it also restricts several healthy foods.
- Is sugar forbidden? Avoiding [sugary drinks](#) (like regular soda, energy drinks and super-sweet

tea) is a smart move. But it's not related to those claims that sugar feeds cancer, but because these drinks provide a lot of calories without beneficial nutrients.

Physical Activity: Find Ways to Make Movement Normal

Research about regular physical activity for breast cancer survivors continues to grow. Research shows that it reduces risk of breast cancer and seems to improve survival after a breast cancer diagnosis.

- Healthy levels of insulin and estrogen, a strong immune system and less chronic inflammation are easier to achieve and keep with regular physical activity.
- Better overall health, including improved blood pressure control and less insulin resistance that can lead to type 2 diabetes, are valuable for everyone. And survivors of breast (and other) cancers sometimes face increased risk of these health threats.
- Improved quality of life—with less fatigue and depressive symptoms, improved treatment tolerance and increased fitness for the activities of daily life—means that physical activity brings short-term and long-term benefits after cancer.

Don't get detoured: Health and quality of life benefits of exercise are not based on whether it results in weight loss. If you increase physical activity in hopes of weight loss, don't give up in frustration if the scale shows little change. Stop to notice how it affects your mood, energy and sleep. And remind yourself of the healthy changes inside your body that might not show on the outside.

- Listen to your body and talk with your personal health-care team about moving more, especially if you have issues that pose challenges for exercise—like balance, joint pain or concerns about lymphedema.
- Start where you are and look for opportunities to gradually build more activity into your current lifestyle.

- As you make [movement part of your everyday life](#), stop to find the joy in how it feels to get fresh air, stretch out muscles or feel the boost to your energy and mood after physical activity.

A navigational aid: [AICR's Healthy10 Challenge](#) can guide you in gradually increasing physical activity as well as including more nutrient-rich plant foods and finding the right balance for you of other foods.

Healthy Weight: What's Healthy for You

Overall, women with high levels of body fat tend to have worse outcomes after breast cancer, including greater risk of other health problems like heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

Keeping a healthy level of body fat can promote health in many ways. That's because excess body fat sends signaling proteins throughout the body and changes hormone levels that result in chronic inflammation, oxidative stress and insulin resistance (with higher levels of insulin). In post-menopausal women, it raises levels of estrogen, too.

Don't get detoured: This does not mean that women who currently have high levels of body fat need to try to get their weight down to what body mass index (BMI) charts label a healthy weight. A weight that is healthy for one person is not necessarily a healthy weight for someone else.

- Think beyond "weight." A scale measures both body fat and lean tissue (like muscle and bone). For everyone—and especially after a cancer diagnosis—keeping or even gaining muscle mass brings many benefits.
- It's not a race. Concern about your health might prompt you to try to reduce your weight as quickly as possible. But rapid weight loss is especially likely to include more muscle loss. Talk with your individual health-care provider about if, when and how much weight loss might be healthful for you.
- Changing old habits takes practice. Like driving on "auto-pilot" and taking a route using roads you travel often, it's easy to gradually slip back into the habits that led to weight gain to begin with. For example, it could be food choices, sugary drinks, big portions or habits of eating out of boredom or stress. Find and develop workable new alternatives, not short-term restrictions that

you can't wait to give up.

A navigational aid: The [New American Plate](#) can show you how to find different options that work for you in eating habits that support good health and help reach and maintain a weight that's healthy for you.

Take Home Message

Use the [AICR Cancer Prevention Recommendations](#) like a GPS. The Recommendations show a broad enough path that you can travel the route in a way that fits your personal preferences, health needs and lifestyle.

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<http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/article/diet-physical-activity-breast-cancer>