



# CANCER PREHABILITATION TOOLKIT

*Your guide to preparing for cancer treatment and recovery*

## Acknowledgements

This Prehabilitation Toolkit was developed by the Macmillan Prehabilitation Clinical Project Managers NI, with funding and support from Macmillan Cancer Support, in close collaboration with healthcare professionals, patients, and the Northern Ireland Cancer Network.

We gratefully acknowledge the valuable contributions, insights, and lived experiences that shaped this resource. Their dedication and partnership have ensured the toolkit reflects both professional expertise and the voices of those it is designed to support.



## What is Prehabilitation?

Prehabilitation (prehab) is a programme designed to help you prepare for cancer treatment by improving your physical health, nutrition, and mental wellbeing.



**Prehab focuses on three key areas:**

- **Physical activity** – Regular exercise to boost fitness and strength
- **Nutrition & weight** – Eating well and maintaining a healthy weight
- **Mental wellbeing** – Managing stress and supporting a positive mindset

**Benefits of Prehab** can be seen in as little as 2 weeks;

- Helps you recover faster and may reduce hospital stay
- Can reduce treatment side effects
- Boosts strength, fitness and energy
- Gives you more control over your health and recovery
- Supports mental wellbeing and reduces stress

Stopping smoking and reducing alcohol can further improve your outcomes.

***Small steps today can make a big difference to your recovery***

This booklet will help you reflect on areas that may benefit from change and give you practical tips to improve your wellbeing before and during treatment.

For more advice, speak to your clinical nurse specialist or a member of your healthcare team.

## Physical Activity

Being more physically active can help you prepare for cancer treatment. Even if you haven't been active for a while, starting now can bring benefits. How much physical activity you can do and at what level, differs from person to person.



**The guidelines below will let you know how much exercise you should be doing and give some suggestions of the type of activities you could consider:**

- Aim for 150 minutes of moderate exercise or 75 minutes of vigorous activity per week (this could be 20 minutes/day or two 10 minute sessions to make it more achievable)
- Do activities to increase your strength and balance twice per week

**It is safe and recommended to exercise when you have cancer, even during treatment. Maintaining fitness and muscle mass can help you tolerate your treatment. If you need advice or have any concerns please speak to your GP, Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) or healthcare team.**





This diagram shows how much physical activity we should aim to achieve each week to help maintain a healthy lifestyle. It gives examples of activities you can do.

#### Tips to increase your physical activity:

- Make small changes to your daily routine - Go for a walk at lunchtime, be active during TV ad breaks, march on the spot when waiting for the kettle to boil, park further away from the supermarket entrance, do housework chores or gardening, take the stairs instead of the lift
- Walk every day and attempt to walk a little further or faster every few days
- Using a step tracker or activity app can help you see your progress and keep you motivated. Free NHS apps include: Active 10 and Couch to 5K. These tools make it easier to set goals, monitor your activity, and celebrate your achievements.
- Choose an activity that suits you, such as cycling, swimming, dancing, yoga, pilates etc.
- Do strength and resistance exercises twice a week. Use weights, bands, or household items to build and maintain muscle mass

## Exercising with Cancer

**Staying active can help maintain muscle strength, reduce fatigue, and support daily function before and during treatment.**

### Aim:

150 minutes moderate activity or 75 minutes vigorous activity each week (this could be 20 mins per day, 10 mins x 2 sessions)

Strength training 2 days per week

Balance training 2 days per week



### 1. Consult with health team

If you're new to exercise, haven't been active for a while, or feel unsure, speak to your healthcare professional first. They can help you choose safe activities that suit your needs.

### 2. Start slowly

Increase your exercise time slowly and gradually. Take breaks whenever you need.

### 3. Be safe

Avoid exercise if you have:

- Risk of bleeding
- Abnormal blood counts
- A fever
- Severe fatigue
- Severe pain

### 4. Aerobic Exercise

**Frequency:** Aim for 3–5 days per week

**Intensity:** Moderate – you should be able to talk but not sing during activity

**Time:** 20–60 minutes total; can be split into shorter sessions if needed

**Type:** Activities that use large muscle groups and are weight-bearing

Examples: Walking, jogging, swimming, cycling

### 5. Strength Training

**Frequency:** 2–3 times per week

**Intensity:** Moderate – choose a weight you can lift 10–15 times. Start with 3–5 repetitions and build up to 15.

**Time:** 1–3 sets per exercise

**Type:** If you don't have access to machines, use free weights, resistance bands, or bodyweight exercises like squats, wall push-ups, or seated leg lifts.

### 6. Flexibility and balance

Adding exercises for flexibility and balance can help improve mobility and reduce the risk of falls. Consider gentle activities like yoga, tai chi, or pilates.

### 7. Stretching

After each training session, stretch your major muscle groups.

Hold each stretch for 10–30 seconds

Repeat 3–4 times for each muscle group

Stretching helps improve flexibility and reduce stiffness.

### 8. Key message

Stay active, but listen to your body. Rest when needed and avoid complete inactivity.

### Exercise Videos

To access a range of pre-recorded exercise videos and information on managing tiredness you can either:

- Scan the QR code using your smartphone or tablet camera, or
- If viewing a digital copy, click on the link below.



[Move more |  
Macmillan Cancer  
Support](#)



[Exercising safely with  
cancer | Macmillan  
Cancer Support](#)



[Tiredness \(fatigue\)  
and cancer | Macmillan  
Cancer Support](#)

**You can also contact your local Council Leisure Provider for information about their health related exercise programmes and exercise specialists who can give you advice.**



## Nutrition

Receiving a cancer diagnosis can be a challenging and emotional time, often leading to uncertainty and anxiety. These feelings can sometimes result in a loss of appetite and weight.



Our goal is to ensure you are in the best possible health as you prepare for treatment. Eating a healthy, balanced diet is essential, as it can help reduce treatment side effects and support faster recovery.

Here are some key points to consider:

- **Variety and balance:** Consuming a variety of foods and well-balanced meals can boost your energy levels and improve your overall well-being.
- **Hydration:** Drinking enough fluid is vital to maintain normal body functioning and regulate body temperature.

**This section provides general healthy eating and nutritional advice. If you have been given personalised dietary advice by your consultant or clinical nurse specialist, please continue to follow their advice.**

### Benefits of a healthy diet:

- **Wound healing:** Aids recovery post-surgery.
- **Immune system:** Strengthens immunity and infection resistance.
- **Treatment tolerance:** Improves ability to handle treatment and its side effects.
- **Disease prevention:** Reduces risk of heart disease and diabetes.
- **Energy levels:** Reduces fatigue, making you feel stronger and healthier.

## Steps to eating a more varied diet:

- 1. Monitor weight:** Weigh yourself regularly and report significant changes to a health professional. Use resources like the NHS website for meal planning
- 2. Check food choices:** Keep a food diary and compare it with the Eat Well Guide. Watch portion sizes
- 3. Learn healthier options:** Read food labels and use apps like the NHS Food Scanner to find healthier foods
- 4. Consider impact:** Avoid high-sugar diets and plan meals to avoid unhealthy choices when hungry
- 5. Educate family and friends:** Share the importance of a healthy diet with those who cook for you to ensure support

The **Eatwell Guide** provides valuable information on the different food groups and the quantities we should consume to maintain a healthy, balanced diet.

Taking these steps can help you feel better and more in control during this challenging time. If you have any specific dietary concerns or need personalised advice, consulting with a healthcare professional or a registered dietitian can be very beneficial.



For more information and guidance visit the website below.

[www.food.gov.uk/northern-ireland/nutritionni/eatwell-guide](http://www.food.gov.uk/northern-ireland/nutritionni/eatwell-guide)

**If you have lost weight unintentionally, you should inform your clinical nurse specialist or a member of your healthcare team who may refer you to a dietitian.**

**Tips to increase calories and protein if you have lost weight:**

- Have small portions 'little and often.' Try to eat every 2-3 hours throughout the day
- Drink full cream milk with meals. This can be fortified with skimmed milk powder to add protein and energy\*
- Include nourishing snacks throughout the day, e.g. milky puddings, bread based snacks such as malt loaf (i.e. Veda) and cheese or crumpets with butter
- Try adding milk, cheese, butter or cream where possible, which adds calories to your meals and snacks
- If you don't feel like eating, try to have a small portion of something that you can manage and enjoy
- Take snacks and drinks to appointments in case they take longer than planned
- Avoid products labelled 'low fat', 'diet' or 'sugar-free'
- Speak to a healthcare professional if you have any symptoms, such as constipation or nausea that are affecting your appetite

**\*If you have chronic kidney disease only use fortified milk under the guidance of your dietitian.**

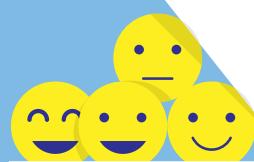
If you have difficulty swallowing (known as dysphagia) that is affecting eating and drinking, please inform your clinical nurse specialist or a member of your healthcare team who may refer you to the speech and language therapist. Swallowing issues can impact your quality of life so it is important to seek specialist help.

**Further nutritional information and useful links - please scan the QR Codes below or copy and paste the links into your web browser.**



## Emotional Wellbeing

A cancer diagnosis can affect how you think and feel. Common feelings are worry, anxiety, and depression. It is normal to experience a range of emotions and it is important to recognise them and get help when needed.



### Preparing emotionally for treatment

People cope in different ways, such as seeking information, problem-solving, using distraction, humour, or talking to someone they trust.

Getting ready for treatment and focusing on your mental health can:

- Help you feel prepared
- Prevent worsening anxiety or depression

### What can you do? - Steps to improve your mental health

**Use available resources and talk to others who understand what you are going through.**

- The **Macmillan Health and Wellbeing Service** in your local HSC Trust offers support and information for people diagnosed with cancer and their families/carers. Details of your local service can be found clicking this link: [Macmillan Health and Wellbeing Services NI](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/health-and-wellbeing-services/northern-ireland).
- Join a patient support group for your cancer type.



**Use previous coping strategies**

- Think about how you have coped with difficult situations in the past and the strategies that you have used e.g. distraction with an activity that you enjoy, like painting, gardening or reading.
- Avoid habits that worsen mental health, such as excessive alcohol or caffeine consumption, staying up late or overworking.

### Learn new ways to manage stress

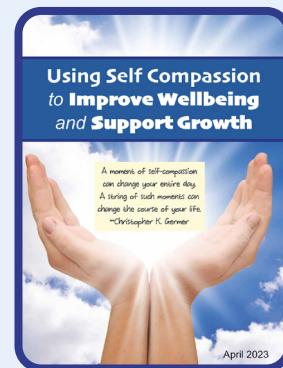
To watch a short video on calming skills you can use when feeling stressed, either:

- Scan the QR code with your smartphone or tablet camera, or
- If you are viewing a digital copy, click the link.



**Be kind to yourself - the words we say to ourselves matter. It doesn't mean ignoring what's happening, it means acknowledging your challenges while reminding yourself of your strengths and focusing on what you can do:**

- I can get through this
- I am not going to be a victim
- I need some time to calm me down
- I have things to be grateful for



Below are links to tools on self-compassion which may help:



### Reflect on your feelings and keep a diary. Focus on the things that you can control

- Mental health apps can help with anxiety, depression or sleep problems. Some examples include Headspace and CALM.

### Treat exercise like your medication

- Research shows that exercise and physical activity can also help your mental health.
- Be physically active daily and exercise regularly.
- Plan your exercise times throughout the week.

### Reach out for support

- Talk to someone you can trust.
- Talking about cancer and sharing your feelings can be incredibly tough. It's important to remember that your healthcare team is there to support you every step of the way. They understand what you're going through and can connect you with a specialist if you need more help.

### Sleep hygiene

- Stick to a consistent sleep schedule: Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day
- Create a calming bedtime routine with relaxing activities like reading, listening to music, or taking a warm bath
- Optimize your sleep environment by keeping your bedroom cool, quiet, and dark
- Avoid watching TV or scrolling on your phone in bed
- Managing anxiety and stress (using techniques above)
- Get regular exercise
- Avoid daytime naps
- Watch what you eat and drink. Avoid caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, and heavy meals 4–6 hours before bed.

Further emotional support information and useful links. Please scan the QR code below or if viewing a digital copy you can click the on the link.



[Help with how  
you're feeling](#)  
| Macmillan  
Cancer Support



[Support -  
Action Cancer](#)



[Prehabilitation  
- Looking after  
your mental  
wellbeing/  
Cancer](#)  
Research UK



[Trouble sleeping  
\(insomnia\) and  
cancer: tips  
and support](#)  
| Macmillan  
Cancer Support

## Healthy Lifestyle Changes

Making healthy lifestyle changes can significantly improve your overall wellbeing and is especially important when preparing for and recovering from cancer treatment.



### Stopping Smoking

Quitting smoking before your cancer treatment is highly beneficial and strongly advised. It can:

- Enhance your body's response to treatment and speed up healing.
- Reduce the risk of treatment interruptions and cancer recurrence.
- Lower the chances of heart, lung, and wound related complications.
- Shorten wound healing time and hospital stays.
- Improve your quality of life post-treatment

### Tips to help you stop smoking

- **Decide when to do it** - make a plan and stick to it
- **Be prepared** - think about what could get in the way of you stopping smoking
- **Ask for help** - talk to your local chemist or GP for free local stop smoking service
- **Tell people you're stopping** - friends and family can support and encourage you
- **Keep trying** - if you don't succeed at first, think about what worked and what didn't
- **Focus on your motivation** - remember why you decided to stop smoking
- **Change your routine** - if you're used to smoking at certain times, try doing things differently to break the link between a certain time or activity and you smoking
- **Keep your mind and hands busy** - try doing something else to distract you, like exercising, watching TV or reading.

Specialist support to help you stop smoking is available through your local Trust Smoking Cessation Service. Speak to your Clinical Nurse Specialist or any member of your healthcare team. Further information and support are available on the Stop Smoking NI website by clicking the link or scanning the QR code.



[Stop Smoking NI](http://www.stopsmokingni.com)

## Reducing or Stopping Drinking

Cutting down on alcohol can also positively impact your treatment and recovery. Drinking more than 4 units per day can double the risk of complications after surgery. To minimize health risks, it's recommended that both men and women limit their alcohol intake to no more than 14 units per week, spread over three or more days. Please refer to the Alcohol Units Guide below on the number of units in each drink and keep a record of your intake.

### Alcohol Units Guide

	<b>Pint of beer (4%)</b> = 2.3 units		<b>Pint of cider (4.5%)</b> = 2.6 units		<b>Alcopop 275ml (4%)</b> = 1.1 units		<b>Can of beer 330ml (5%)</b> = 1.7 units
	<b>Spirits vodka/whiskey 35ml (40%)</b> = 1.4 units		<b>Bottle of spirits 700ml (40%)</b> = 28 units		<b>Small pub bottle of wine 187ml (12%)</b> = 2.3 units		<b>Bottle of wine 750ml (12%)</b> = 9 units

## Tips to help you reduce your alcohol intake

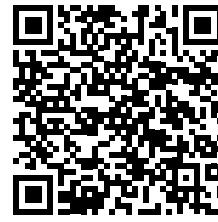
- **Eat a healthy meal** with carbohydrates before drinking
- **Downsize the larger glasses** to smaller ones
- **Stop topping up** to keep track of how much you have
- **Avoid drinking at home alone**, it's harder to keep track
- **Drink soft drinks/alcohol free from a wine glass** to stop you feeling that you're missing out
- **Alternate your drinks with glasses of water**
- **Monitor your intake**, keep a diary of how much you're drinking
- **Know your triggers** and look for alternative situations that don't encourage you to drink
- **Have a goal** and stick to it

Lifestyle changes can be difficult especially during times of stress. If you need help, reach out to your clinical nurse specialist or healthcare team for more specialist support.

**Useful Links**



[Quit smoking -  
Better Health - NHS](#)



[Getting help with  
drug or alcohol  
problems/nidirect](#)



[Resource Hub |  
ASCERT](#)



**My personal reasons for taking part in prehab are:**

1

2

3

**The things I will do to help prepare the best I can for my cancer treatment are:**

1

2

3

**The people who will support me are:**

1

2

3

## Weekly Activity Diary

You can keep track of your weekly activity and progress here.

WEEK	MON	TUE	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT	SUN
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							

# 10 TOP TIPS

for prehab and a  
healthy lifestyle

- 1 Move more, be as active as possible**
- 2 Look after your diet, eat well**
- 3 Keep hydrated by drinking water**
- 4 Cut out or reduce alcohol intake**
- 5 Stop smoking**
- 6 Improve your sleep and manage your energy levels**
- 7 Talk to people about how you feel**
- 8 Practice mindfulness and relaxation**
- 9 Set small goals and keep a diary to track your progress**
- 10 Dont be afraid to ask for help**

Adapted with permission from the Northern Cancer Alliance.

## Who do I contact to find out more?

If you have any questions, please contact your clinical nurse specialist or a member of your hospital team who will support you in the lead up to your cancer treatment.

In some cases, you may be referred to a specialist team who will provide additional prehab advice and support.

