

Feel good in the forest: during and after cancer

Introduction

Spending time in nature has many physical and mental health benefits for everyone. Engaging with natural spaces, such as forests, has been shown to help with relaxation, improve sleep, reduce anxiety and encourage physical activity. This fact sheet, developed by [Penny Brohn UK](#) and [Forestry England](#) explains how you can take part in physical activity and movement in forests during and after treatment for cancer.

Cancer and physical activity

Being active during and after cancer treatment can:

- reduce tiredness
- be good for your heart
- improve your mood and emotional wellbeing
- reduce anxiety and depression
- help you keep to a healthy weight
- strengthen your muscles
- improve bone health
- improve your flexibility and help with stiffness
- improve balance
- increase your confidence¹

What to consider regarding physical activity during and after treatment

For most people with cancer, engaging in physical activity is generally safe. Walking is often encouraged, especially in the early weeks post-surgery and throughout your treatment. However, before starting any new physical activity, it's recommended to discuss your plans with your healthcare team to ensure it is safe and suitable for your specific situation. The following tips are provided by cancer health and wellbeing charity [Penny Brohn UK](#):

- **Set realistic goals:** start slowly and gradually increase the intensity and duration of your activity. Listen to your body and pay attention to how your body responds to different activities at various points in your treatment cycle. For example: gentle walking and exercise in week 1 and gradually increase the intensity and duration as you feel more comfortable and capable leading up to your next treatment. Setting

¹ [Physical activity and cancer | Macmillan Cancer Support](#)

Feel good in the forest: during and after cancer

realistic goals ensures that physical activity remains a positive and supportive part of your cancer journey.

- **Avoid overexertion:** during cancer treatment, your body is already under significant stress. It's not the time to undertake extreme challenges like running a marathon. Instead, focus on maintaining a manageable level of activity that supports your health without overburdening your system.
- **Post-treatment planning:** consider scheduling any major physical events for at least 12 weeks after completing treatment and surgery. This allows your body ample time to recover and regain strength.
- **Focus on maintenance:**
 - **Moderate-Intensity Activities:** Engage in activities like jogging or walking at a moderate intensity. These exercises can be adapted to your energy levels and provide cardiovascular benefits while being gentle on the body.
 - **Muscle-Building Exercises:** Incorporate strength training exercises such as lifting weights or using your body weight. These exercises help maintain lean muscle mass, which is crucial for overall health and can aid in recovery during and after cancer treatment.
- Focusing on these types of exercises can support your physical health without overwhelming your body during treatment.

Cancer and nature

Connecting with nature can:

- help with relaxation, improve sleep and mood, help people generally feel better and provides comfort
- provide a distraction or offer engaging visualisations or experiences that can reduce high symptom distress, pain, tension and state-trait anxiety
- support social interaction and provide a sense of belonging
- help people simply relax and enjoy nature, lose themselves and release control
- bring awareness to a new perspective by invoking feelings of awe, joy and appreciation for the simple things
- increase natural killer cell activity, improve immune response and reduce inflammation²

What to consider regarding nature connection during and after treatment

Here are some tips to stay safe when engaging in outdoor activities:

- **Peripheral neuropathy:** this condition, which can be a side effect of cancer treatment, may affect your ability to safely navigate uneven terrain or engage in

² [Nature-Based Interventions and Exposure among Cancer Survivors: A Scoping Review - PMC \(nih.gov\)](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36111111/)

Feel good in the forest: during and after cancer

certain outdoor activities. Wear sturdy footwear and choose paths that are smooth and well-maintained to minimise the risk of falls or injuries.

- **Sun exposure:** while spending time outdoors can be beneficial, it's important to protect your skin. Use sunscreen, wear protective clothing, and avoid peak sun hours to reduce the risk of sunburn, which can be more pronounced during treatment.
- **Cold weather exposure:** cold temperatures can exacerbate certain treatment side effects, such as neuropathy or joint pain. Dress warmly in layers, and consider shorter outdoor activities during colder months to stay comfortable.
- **Fatigue Management:** outdoor activities should be balanced with rest. Plan shorter, more frequent outings rather than extended periods outdoors to manage energy levels effectively.
- **Hydration and nutrition:** ensure you stay hydrated and maintain energy levels with appropriate snacks or meals when spending time in nature, especially during longer outings.

By considering these factors, you can safely enjoy the benefits of connecting with nature during and after cancer treatment.

Find your feel good in the forest

[Get active in nature](#)

- The sensory experience of the forest helps increase motivation and enhances our enjoyment of physical activity.
- Walking, running and cycling are great ways to explore the outdoors. Forestry England has waymarked trails of a range of distances so you can choose a route that works for you.

[Relax and unwind in the forest](#)

- Slowing down and taking time to notice nature can help reduce symptoms of anxiety and promote a state of relaxation.
- Forestry England's [wellbeing trails](#) will guide you through a series of exercises that help build your emotional connection with nature, and yourself. If you don't have a trail local to you, you can download the 'my forest wellbeing journal' and use in any natural space.

[Connect with friends, family and the forest](#)

- The longevity of trees and forests means they often carry an emotional connection for people and provide a sense of time, connection with place and memories. They also offer a meeting place to come together with friends and family.
- People even get on with each other better when they're immersed in the natural world - one study revealed that people were actually more sociable after spending time in the woods!

Feel good in the forest: during and after cancer

- Invite a friend to join you for a cup of coffee, pack a picnic or enjoy a walk with a friend.

Know before you go

- Every Forestry England forest webpage has information on the facilities available at that forest - for example, whether there are toilet facilities, accessible parking or easy access trails to follow.
- Find out more: [Accessibility information | Forestry England](#)

Useful links

- www.pennybrohn.org.uk
- www.forestryengland.uk
- www.macmillan.org.uk

Thank you to Penny Brohn UK for their help producing this information sheet.

