On May 7, the Clinical Oncology Society of Australia (COSA) issued a position statement recommending that exercise be considered an important part of routine cancer care.

“Exercise is the best medicine someone with cancer can take in addition to their standard cancer treatments,” said Prue Cormie of Australian Catholic University, chair of COSA’s Exercise and Cancer Group.

A growing body of evidence confirms that exercise during cancer treatment has multiple benefits, including fewer and less severe side effects, reduced fatigue, less psychological distress and better quality of life. In addition, it may help lower the risk of recurrence and cancer-related death. Several clinical trials are now under way to evaluate the effects of exercise on cancer survival.

The COSA experts recommend that exercise be “embedded as part of standard practice in cancer care” and considered as “an adjunct therapy that helps counteract the adverse effects of cancer and its treatment.” All members of the multidisciplinary cancer team should promote physical activity. Best care practice includes referral to an exercise physiologist or physiotherapist with experience in cancer care, they wrote.

“All people with cancer should avoid inactivity and return to normal daily activities as soon as possible following diagnosis,” the Exercise and Cancer Group advises.

The group recommends getting at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic exercise—such as walking, biking or swimming—and at least two or three sessions of resistance exercise, such as weight-lifting, each week. Exercise recommendations should be tailored to each person’s abilities, and adaptations may be needed based on disease- and treatment-related adverse effects, anticipated disease trajectory and health status.

Yet despite the convincing body of epidemiological and clinical trial evidence demonstrating the benefits of exercise, a majority of Australians living with cancer do not get the recommended amount of physical activity—and this is likely the case in other countries as well.
“Historically, the advice to cancer patients was to rest and avoid activity. We now know this advice may be harmful to patients, and every person with cancer would benefit from exercise medicine,” Cormie wrote in The Conversation. “If the effects of exercise could be encapsulated in a pill, it would be prescribed to every cancer patient worldwide and viewed as a major breakthrough in cancer treatment.”

Click here to read the full COSA position statement.