

Managing Stiffness and Aches in Your Muscles and Joints

Aches and stiffness in your muscles and joints are common side effects of cancer treatment. Read more to learn what can help lessen your discomfort.

About stiffness and aches

- You may feel discomfort in the first few months of treatment or later, up to a year or more if you are on endocrine therapy.
- Stiffness and aches often occur in the morning, or after long periods of sitting.
- Both are common side effects of medications called aromatase inhibitors (such as exemestane, anastrozole, letrozole) and sometimes tamoxifen.

If you experience these side effects, you are not alone. Please let your care team know so we can support you.

What Can You Do?

We may suggest:

- 150 minutes (about 2 and a half hours) of **moderate intensity** exercise/week
 - Examples of **moderate intensity** exercise include:
 - brisk walking (4 miles per hour)
 - biking 10-12 miles per hour
 - pushing a lawn mower
 - water aerobics
- **Strength training** at least 2 times per week has also been shown to be helpful
 - Aim for 8-10 strength training exercises, with 10-15 repetitions of each exercise
- For those not accustomed to moderate intensity exercise, check with your care team first before starting an exercise program.
 - If ok to proceed, start by increasing physical activity (even 5-10 min periods can be helpful throughout the day) gradually to 20 mins a day, working your way up to 30 mins a day.
- Acupuncture

Talk to Your Doctor About...

- **Over the counter pain relievers** such as Tylenol, Advil or Aleve can also be helpful when taken in moderation. Talk to your treatment team before taking these medications on a regular basis.
- **A moist heat pack** applied to aching areas can be helpful

- **Topicals** such as Salonpas patches or cream or CBD oil applied to the skin are safe to try. These do not require a prescription.
- **Cymbalta (Duloxetine)** is an anti-depressant medication which can help to lessen muscle and joint discomfort. Talk to your treatment team if you are interested in trying this medication.
- **Taking a break from cancer medication**, also called a “Drug Holiday”, can help relieve symptoms. Talk with your treatment team to see if this may be an option for you now or at any point in your treatment.
 - *Taking a holiday of 2-8 weeks and then resuming the same drug can help to lessen muscle and joint discomfort*
 - *Taking holidays of up to 3 months per year (cumulative) has been shown to have no impact on one’s recurrence risk*
 - *Switching to a different aromatase inhibitor, or to tamoxifen, may also lessen or relieve symptoms after taking a drug holiday*

Not sure where to start? There are programs that can help you get on track.

Mass General Cancer Center Programs

Cancer Rehab Program: [massgeneral.org/cancer/rehab](https://www.massgeneral.org/cancer/rehab)

Lifestyle Medicine Program, including exercise videos designed for cancer patients:

[massgeneral.org/cancer/lifestylemedicine](https://www.massgeneral.org/cancer/lifestylemedicine)

Integrative Therapies, such as Acupuncture or Yoga: <https://www.massgeneral.org/cancer-center/patient-and-family-resources/supportive-care/integrative-therapies/default>

Community Programs

Livestrong Program through the YMCA: <https://www.ymca.org/what-we-do/healthy-living/fitness/livestrong>

Talk with your treatment team if nothing listed above helps or if experience severe discomfort.

