

Exercising After Breast Cancer: Moving Toward Health



Treatments for breast cancer can take a toll on both your body and your emotions. The effects of cancer and cancer treatment may make you become less active, more stressed, tired all the time, and unable to sleep well. And the worse you feel, the less active you tend to be. After treatment, you might find that you lack the strength and energy to go back to the activities you did before your cancer diagnosis.

What can you do to gain strength and feel healthier and more like yourself again? Many women find that regular exercise can improve their fitness level and their mental outlook.

Women who start an exercise program can help lower their risk of cancer coming back and their risk of dying from breast cancer. Breast cancer can make you feel as though your body has failed you. But research shows that exercise can help you regain some control over your body and your life.

Benefits and precautions

Exercise offers many benefits to breast cancer survivors. Exercise can help by doing these things:

- Increase your fitness, which can help you return to your daily activities more quickly
- Provide a sense of well-being, self-esteem, and a positive mood
- Improve your ability to sleep
- Reduce the side effects from treatment, such as extreme tiredness (fatigue) and anxiety
- Help control weight

Before starting an exercise program, get a checkup from your healthcare provider. If you have no underlying health issues or major side effects from treatment, you might be able to follow an exercise program of your choice.

But if you're still getting breast cancer treatment, check with your provider before starting to exercise. Many cancer treatments can weaken the body. Some of them can even affect the heart. If this is the case for you, you may need to follow a modified exercise routine. This will take your physical condition and type of treatment into account.

Many cancer centers have physical therapists or physical medicine and rehabilitation specialists who work with people with cancer. They can help you design a safe exercise program. If you're in treatment and interested in exercising, ask your healthcare provider if you should see such an expert.

Getting started

It's best to start exercising slowly, especially if you weren't active before your diagnosis. People who try to exercise almost every day may find that a small amount of exercise helps them get in the habit of working out in some way. This is true even if it's only 5 to 10 minutes a day. Slowly working up to exercising 30 minutes a day is a good goal. Research has shown that benefits can be seen even with lesser amounts of regular exercise. This is especially true for women who were not active before.

Walking, biking, or doing water exercises are good aerobic choices. Walking is a natural and easy choice. It can be done anywhere at almost any time. Finding an exercise that you like is the key to sticking with it.

You should also think about lifting weights (strength training). Lifting weights can help keep your bones and muscles strong, especially after menopause. Some women worry that this type of exercise might make certain conditions linked to breast cancer, such as lymphedema, worse. (Lymphedema is swelling caused by a buildup of lymph fluid in the arm and chest on the side of the breast cancer.) Studies have shown that strength training doesn't make lymphedema worse. Still, it's a good idea to check with your healthcare provider before starting any exercise program.

Joining an exercise program at a fitness club is a good choice for many people. Many fitness clubs around the country now offer special programs for cancer survivors.

Sticking with it

The hardest part of an exercise program tends to be sticking with it. People often drop out of exercise programs within the first 3 to 6 months of starting.

One way to stay motivated is to join an exercise group at a local fitness center. The social aspect can be an added benefit to working out. And many fitness centers offer personal trainers. They can help you stay motivated. Working out with a friend is another good idea, especially if you're working out at home. Walking in your neighborhood might be more useful over time than working out at a fitness center. This is because it's easier to exercise near home than it is to travel for a workout. And having family or friends to walk with helps keep you motivated.

Many people find that a cancer diagnosis can act as a wake-up call to not take your health for granted. Exercising and getting into good physical shape is an excellent way to take charge of your overall health. Not only can it help you recover from cancer treatment, it can also have health benefits for the rest of your life.

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