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Research credits healing power of exercise in war against cancer

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HACKENSACK, N.J.—The standard weapons in the fight against cancer—surgery, chemotherapy and radiation—may soon be joined by something far simpler: exercise.

New research shows that regular physical activity helps reduce the risk of recurrence of breast cancer and slows the advance of prostate cancer.

In a few years, exercise will probably be prescribed regularly for cancer rehabilitation, said Melinda Irwin, an expert on cancer and exercise at Yale University School of Medicine. Personal trainers may join oncologists, surgeons and radiologists as members of the cancer-treatment team.

Exercise will become a "targeted therapy, similar to chemotherapy or hormonal therapy," Irwin said

Any regular physical activity—the equivalent of a 30-minute walk, five times a week—will do.

"Don't think you have to work up a sweat or train for a marathon to benefit," Irwin said.

Exercise offers many other advantages: It fights the fatigue caused by cancer treatment, calms anxiety and helps survivors feel better about themselves and their bodies. Some personal trainers now specialize in working with cancer patients and more will soon be certified through a program of the American College of Sports Medicine. There are 10 million cancer survivors in the United States, 22 percent of them women who have had breast cancer, 17 percent of them men who've had prostate cancer. Exercise makes sense for most of them—to live longer, avoid other health problems, and just feel better.

Heart attack patients are now routinely put on exercise plans. But workouts for cancer patients are neither prescribed by doctors nor covered by health insurance.

"We're where cardiac rehab was 20 years ago," Irwin said. Once exercise was shown through research to prevent fatal heart attacks, 12 weeks of rehabilitation became the standard of care for most heart patients.

One day, that will probably happen with cancer patients.



Even with a low level of exercise, people benefit psychologically, said Rita Musanti, an oncology nurse-practitioner at the Cancer Institute of New Jersey who earned her doctorate studying exercise and cancer recovery. With so many cancer survivors in the community, she'd like to see informal networks created to encourage recovering cancer patients.

'Out of that slump'

Beth Wajts of Hillsdale, N.J., joined the Ridgewood YMCA's free "Living Healthy, Living Strong" class in January after her second surgery for breast cancer, followed by chemotherapy and radiation.

"I cannot believe the way I walked in, and the way I walked out," she said.

"I never believed I would get out of that slump," Wajts said. "Now I feel incredible."

Angelo Chiusano, 81, joined after 43 radiation treatments for prostate cancer and surgery for an aortic aneurysm. Thanks to the camaraderie in the weight room, "I've gained a new family," the Oakland resident said. "It's made such a difference in my feelings."

After doing the weight-resistance circuit in the gym each session, he swam. "Then, when I go home, I walk a mile," he said. He has continued his workouts even though the program has ended.

Researchers are working to understand how physical activity helps fight cancer. Their findings so far suggest that exercise:

- Reduces blood levels of insulin, a substance in the body that causes cells to divide and grow more quickly. Women with high levels of insulin have a slightly higher risk of breast cancer and a much higher rate of recurrence and death.
- Helps repair infection-fighting T-cells, restoring the immune system after it has been damaged by chemotherapy.
- Reduces levels of circulating estrogen and testosterone, two hormones linked with breast, endometrial and prostate cancers. Even with medication to suppress estrogen production, some estrogen is stored in fat cells. Exercise may help by converting fat to muscle.
- Prevents weight gain and promotes weight loss, important because obesity is associated with lower rates of survival for many forms of cancer.

Most of the scientific work so far has focused on women with breast cancer, simply because there are so many of them. But studies have also shown exercise has positive effects for survivors of colorectal and prostate cancers. Among men older than 65, three hours of vigorous activity a week was associated with a decline in death from prostate cancer.

Jump right in

Exercise is now considered so beneficial that cancer experts are even encouraging patients to begin or

resume exercise while treatment is under way. Workouts might need to be scaled back, but "evidence strongly suggests that exercise is not only safe and feasible during cancer treatment, but that it can also improve physical functioning and some aspects of quality of life," according to the American Cancer Society.

Lockey Maissonneuve, a 41-year-old personal trainer, went through two mastectomies and chemotherapy two years ago. She is now is training for a triathlon.

"If you're in treatment, the first week or two you try to do anything, you need to take a nap," she said. "If there's a day you want to exercise, do it."

Wearing a wig was uncomfortably hot in the gym, so she switched to a kerchief. With her immunity reduced by chemo, she wiped down the equipment before she used it.

"The trainer is almost like your bodyguard," said Julie Percy, of Parisi Sports Club in Midland Park, N.J., who also specializes in work with cancer patients. "We maneuver you to the right equipment, give you a sense of security."

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