



## Treatment Topics & Resources

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### Exercise Key To Improved Quality of Life for Cancer Patients

If you are recovering from chemotherapy, the last thing you may want to do is exercise. But exercise may be just what the doctor orders to help battle cancer-related fatigue. Two studies cite the importance of exercise for cancer patients following treatment.

A study published in the May 1, 1997, issue of *Cancer*, said patients who participated in an aerobic exercise program after undergoing chemotherapy experienced better physical performance, increased hemoglobin levels, and less fatigue than patients who did not exercise. The study included 32 cancer patients with solid tumors or non-Hodgkin's lymphoma who received high-dose chemotherapy and autologous peripheral blood stem cell transplantation. The researchers compared 16 patients in a control group (no exercise) and 16 patients who participated in a medically supervised aerobics program. The program consisted of treadmill walking five days a week for six weeks, gradually increasing in duration from three minutes per day in the first week to 30 minutes per day during the final week. Studies show 70 percent of cancer patients experience fatigue during chemotherapy and radiation therapy or after surgery. "Furthermore, up to 30 percent of cancer survivors report a loss of energy after treatment," wrote the authors. "This impairment in physical fitness is a significant contributor to a decreased quality of life in cancer patients."

"For some patients, this impairment of physical performance imposes severe limitations in normal daily activities such as stair climbing, walking, or housekeeping. To avoid fatigue... patients are often advised to rest and limit their daily activities." The authors noted these recommendations might unintentionally perpetuate fatigue. By exercising, patients were able to keep their muscles in shape, which made everyday tasks easier. Physical activity also can produce secondary benefits such as improved states of mind and mood, increased self-confidence, decreased depression, and higher levels of physical independence. The authors concluded that to help overcome fatigue, cancer patients should be counseled to increase their level of exercise rather than the amount of rest in the recovery phase after high-dose chemotherapy.

#### Another View

A second study, published in the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* in 1998, included 20 cancer patients who had undergone radiation and/or chemotherapy. The patients participated in two 10-week sessions of an outpatient wellness program that consisted of aerobic exercise, strength training, flexibility, and relaxation. The study showed a 43 percent increase in strength and a 50 percent increase in endurance.

"Our focus was to re-establish strength and flexibility, while mainstreaming the patients back into everyday activity," said Paula Lilly, study author and director of the Cancer Well Fit program at the Santa Barbara Athletic Club. "For the most part, the cancer patients in our program are able to return to a more active life again. We think by adding some sort of physical activity, cancer patients reach this level sooner." During the first session, Lilly said patients exhibited an improvement in attitude and a renewed feeling of empowerment. "In the second week, we see an increase in the patient's self-image and core strength," Lilly added. "The patients no longer feel like cancer patients."

### **Continuing Studies**

"We still do not know a lot, but the research looks promising that physical activity will contribute to an improved quality of life for cancer survivors," said Colleen Doyle, MS, RD, director of nutrition and physical activity for the American Cancer Society (ACS).

"The challenge with these studies is the numbers are small. Typically, survivors are highly interested in programs like nutrition and physical activity that allow them to take control and improve their quality of life," Doyle said. "This is a relatively new area for the ACS, and we are in the process of looking at the science around nutrition and physical activity for post-treatment cancer patients." In light of the positive findings, the authors of both studies noted the need for further research. Because the issue of fatigue is complex and can be related to several factors, the ACS suggests that patients should talk with their health care professional before starting an aerobics or regular exercise program.