



Physical Therapy Helps You Fight Back Against Breast Cancer

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As you are fighting cancer, your team of doctors is working hard to keep you alive and help you become cancer free. They're focused on life and death. They may not have the time to help you cope with side-effects and after-effects of your cancer treatment. This is where your physical therapist comes in.



PHYSICAL THERAPY DURING BREAST CANCER TREATMENT

Physical therapy improves energy levels, mental outlook, and muscle and nerve function during cancer treatment.

Cancer-Related Fatigue

If you're among the 80% of breast cancer patients who experience cancer-related fatigue during chemotherapy, then you know how debilitating it can be to feel tired and have decreased energy no matter how much you sleep or rest. Exercise is the only proven way to decrease cancer-related fatigue. Physical therapists help you safely exercise throughout your course of cancer treatments. They are skilled at modifying your exercise program as your treatment progresses and your symptoms change.

Mental Wellbeing

Physical therapy also helps improve mental outlook, decrease brain fog, and facilitate longer and deeper sleep. Physical therapy is not a substitute for proper care from mental health specialists for those suffering from anxiety or depression, but it's a helpful adjunct to that care. Physical therapy provides a supportive environment where patients can engage in physical activities that release endorphins, promoting a sense of well-being and improving relaxation.

Body Aches, Muscle Weakness, and Balance Problems

Supervised, individualized exercise available in physical therapy can delay the onset of chemotherapy-induced peripheral neuropathy. These neuropathies are common and cause symptoms such as burning, tingling, or searing pain and muscle weakness. Neuropathies also lead to decreased proprioception, which is a decreased awareness of where your body is in space. Muscle weakness in the legs and ankles along with impaired proprioception increases the risk of stumbling, knocking into things, and falling. Physical therapy uses exercise to delay the onset of peripheral neuropathy symptoms and uses balance training to decrease the likelihood of bumps, bruises, and falls even in the presence of neuropathy.



Pre-Mastectomy Physical Therapy Check-up

A pre-mastectomy physical therapy check-up helps you prepare for your surgery. Your physical therapist assesses your posture and shoulder mobility so you are aware of your pre-surgery capabilities and may set the goal to return to that level during your rehabilitation. Your therapist also helps prepare you for what to expect during your recovery, including support garments you will need, and movement restrictions to follow, normal healing progress, and how to catch early signs of complications. Your therapist also teaches you the exercises that will be safe in the days and weeks following surgery so you can be prepared and take better control of your recovery.





PHYSICAL THERAPY AFTER BREAST CANCER SURGERY

Posture

After mastectomy, physical therapy is important for restoring normal posture. Mastectomy affects posture because it changes the distribution of weight in the chest wall - the more tissue that's removed, the more you'll notice this effect. You'll likely notice changes in the distribution of weight across the chest wall even if you have immediate reconstruction or have expanders placed for future reconstruction.

Mastectomy also causes pain over the chest wall that may cause people to collapse through their chests and take shallow breaths in an effort to protect the area and decrease pain. Additionally, scar tissue, bruising, swelling, nerve injury, or tissue injury from radiation may cause tenderness and limit the ability to stand up straight or move into certain positions.

Muscle weakness leads to further posture changes. If you've been standing in a posture that's protective of your chest, a common side-effect is that the muscles of your upper back lengthen and weaken making it more difficult to sit or stand up straight. Because upper back muscles also connect to your shoulder blades, changes in these muscles affect normal shoulder function. Those who have had reconstruction that involves a flap from the abdominal muscles, latissimus dorsi, or gracilis muscles will have weakness in those donor flap sites that lead to postural deficits. Up to 82% of people who have mastectomy and reconstruction will have postural changes. Physical therapists provide deep breathing techniques, exercises, and manual therapies that help you return to your normal presurgical posture or even improve your posture from what it was before surgery.

Shoulder Function

Surgeons typically ask you to limit how you move your shoulder after mastectomy so the surgical incisions are able to heal optimally. Physical therapists guide you through these limitations, allowing you to be confident in moving your arm as much as is safely possible. As healing progresses, physical therapists progress your exercises to restore normal movement to your arm and allow you to use it for reaching, lifting, and carrying objects.



Physical therapists also look for common shoulder complications of mastectomy such as frozen shoulder, lymphatic cording, or axillary web syndrome. Frozen shoulder is a tightening of the shoulder joint capsule that can limit arm movements and make them painful. Lymphatic cording, which is also called axillary web syndrome, can also limit arm movements and make them painful, but it's caused by a hardening of lymphatic vessels in the armpit, chest, or arm. It's more common in those who have had lymph node dissection. Physical therapists identify frozen shoulder and lymphatic cording early and use gentle manual therapies to help release the joint capsule or lymphatic cords and restore normal shoulder movement.

Research shows that the incidence of shoulder impairments one year after breast cancer surgery is only 4% among those who have had rehabilitative care compared to 24% in those who have not.

Post-Mastectomy Pain Syndrome

Post-Mastectomy Pain Syndrome is nerve pain in the chest, underarm, or arm that persists for at least 3 months after surgery. It is present in up to 50% of people who have undergone mastectomy. Survivors with this syndrome often describe their pain as numbness, tingling, itching, burning, or shooting. It may lead to postural changes, disuse of the arm, and difficulty sleeping due to pain. Physical therapy offers benefits that can significantly improve the quality of life for individuals experiencing post-mastectomy pain syndrome. Manual therapies, activity modification, postural adjustments, deep breathing, and exercise encourage improved nerve mobility and health and help to decrease pain and improve overall function.

Heart Health

Many breast cancer survivors go on to live with heart and circulatory issues due to the damaging effects of chemotherapy and radiation. While physical therapy cannot reverse the effects of medication and radiation, it can help to improve heart health. Physical therapists assess your endurance and functional ability and then supervise an exercise program that is tailored to you. Physical therapists help ensure your safety by monitoring your breathing, blood pressure, oxygen levels, perceived exertion, dizziness, chest pain, heart rate, and heart rhythms. Physical therapists also progress your exercise program as you gain fitness and help you decide whether and when it may be appropriate for you to transition to a home fitness program or a community-based fitness program.





Lymphedema

Lymphedema is swelling in the arm that may occur after breast cancer treatment. It's more common after axillary lymph node dissection, but may also affect survivors who have not had this treatment. Overall, it affects 20-30% of breast cancer patients. Symptoms may appear in the weeks or months after breast cancer diagnosis or they may appear many years later. Early symptoms include heaviness or mild swelling that resolves when your arm is elevated, as when you lie down and your arm is not hanging to gravity. In later stages, the swelling does not resolve even with elevation, becomes more severe, and may limit movements of your fingers, wrist, elbow, or shoulder. The skin of the arm may thicken, feel tight, and be more fragile.

If caught and treated early, lymphedema does not have to progress to more severe stages. Regular post-mastectomy physical therapy rehabilitation will help prevent lymphedema and catch it early if it does occur. While there is no cure for lymphedema, physical therapists trained in complete decongestive therapy can help you live with and manage the condition.

Complete decongestive therapy is a comprehensive, multi-step program that involves manual lymphatic drainage, compression therapy, exercise, and skincare.

Lymphatic drainage is a gentle manual technique applied lightly over the skin in slow, rhythmic strokes that allows the lymphatic system to take in excess fluid from the arm and return it to the heart. Many people find lymphatic drainage to be relaxing, like a gentle massage. If the lymphatic system in the affected arm and armpit is too impaired to handle excess fluid, your therapist will reroute it to unaffected areas. After lymphatic drainage, you may feel like you have to empty your bladder. This is a sign that your body is getting rid of excess fluid. The number of manual lymphatic drainage sessions you need depends upon the severity of your lymphedema.

Compression garments allow you to maintain the benefits of your manual lymphatic drainage sessions that your arm does not refill with fluid between sessions. Those with very mild swelling may not wear compression at all and may instead choose to learn techniques to minimize swelling. Others may only need over-the-counter arm compression sleeves between manual lymphatic drainage sessions and at the end of care. Those with more swelling may have weeks of manual lymphatic drainage. Between sessions, they will be fitted with short-stretch bandages so that swelling does not return. At the end of the lymphatic drainage sessions, they will be fitted with a custom compression sleeve that is made specially for the contours of their arm. Usually people choose to get at least two sleeves, so that one may be worn while the other is washed. Whether over-the-counter or custom made, arm sleeves lose their shape over time and need to be replaced every 6 months.

Complete decongestive therapy also includes exercise and skin care. Gradual, low-impact exercises help to improve lymphatic flow, strengthen muscles, and enhance flexibility without exacerbating swelling. Therapists tailor exercise programs to individual needs, ensuring safety and effectiveness. Therapists also teach you how to properly monitor and care for your skin, which becomes more fragile and prone to infections such as cellulitis due to lymphedema.

A physical therapist qualified in complete decongestive therapy offers a holistic approach to managing lymphedema after breast cancer treatment. The therapy reduces swelling, improves mobility, promotes self-care, and empowers survivors to enhance their quality of life.





Osteoporosis

Breast cancer survivors have a 68% greater chance than their peers of having osteopenia, moderately weak bones, or osteoporosis, more severe bone weakness. Part of this increased risk is likely due to the use of hormonal treatments in the 8 out of 10 breast cancers that are hormone-receptor positive. Common drugs to treat such cancers are aromatase inhibitors such as anastrozole (Arimidex), exemestane (Aromasin), and letrozole (Femara). Aromatase inhibitors work by blocking an enzyme that converts other hormones into estrogen. In other words, it cuts off the estrogen that may be feeding the cancer. Unfortunately, aromatase inhibitors decrease overall estrogen levels, and estrogen is important to bone health. Without adequate estrogen, bones become weaker and less dense. Those who already have low estrogen levels due to menopause are already at high risk for having weak bones. Aromatase inhibitors multiply this risk.

Osteopenia and osteoporosis are treated with combined medical care and physical therapy. Doctors may prescribe medications or vitamins such as calcium and vitamin D to help with bone health. Physical therapists prescribe exercise to improve bone health, including strengthening and moderate-impact activities such as walking or dancing. Importantly, physical therapists play a crucial role in reducing your risk of fracture by teaching you how you can modify your daily activities. Bending forward, for example, increases risk of spinal fracture, whereas bending backwards is generally protective. Many exercises that survivors decide to engage in such as Pilates, yoga, and lifting weights can actually increase fracture risk if they're not done correctly. Physical therapy will teach you how to carry out your everyday activities and exercise to keep your bones as strong as they can be.



Pelvic Health



Up to 77% of breast cancer survivors will have urinary or sexual dysfunction during and in the years after life-saving treatments. Hormonal breast cancer treatments are a major contributor to this high prevalence. Like mentioned above, breast cancers that grow larger in the presence of estrogen are often treated with therapies that limit estrogen supply to the cancer. These therapies are life-saving as they starve cancer cells and help prevent cancer from returning. Unfortunately, these medications also starve other parts of the body from estrogen, including the pelvic floor, and may have a negative impact on urinary and sexual health.

Pelvic health physical therapists play an important role in helping those on hormone therapies reduce the symptoms associated with decreased estrogen to the vulva, urethra, and vagina. Hormone therapy contributes to vaginal dryness and to atrophy in the vagina and around the urethra. Some people notice that their labia minora, the hairless inner lips of the vagina, are smaller than they used to be or seem to be disappearing altogether. Others notice that they now leak urine when they didn't before or that leaks are increasing in frequency and volume. Still others notice vaginal dryness that affects intercourse or makes it uncomfortable to wear clothing that rubs on the vulva.

Pelvic health physical therapists advise patients of options to decrease their bothersome symptoms and teach patients how to optimize use of their pelvic floor muscles to further decrease pelvic floor issues.

Physical therapists provide guidance on vaginal moisturizers and lubricants and show you how to best apply and use them. They advise on how to care for your vulva to minimize irritation. They assess whether changing your habits is likely to improve your symptoms. This may include changes to diet, hydration, toileting, sexual activity and stress management. They provide resources or refer you to counseling if you have body image changes that are affecting your sexual health.

Physical therapists also assess the muscles of your pelvic floor, related muscles of the hips and back, and any other neuromusculoskeletal contributions to your urinary or sexual problems. Physical therapists help you gain better awareness and control of your pelvic floor muscles, help you strengthen or stretch them, depending on what you need, and help your pelvic floor muscles work in coordination with the rest of your body. Some who have pain with intercourse, for example, are in the habit of tightening their pelvic floor muscles to guard against anticipated pain. Unfortunately, this habit only increases pain with vaginal penetration. Physical therapy can help you break this pain cycle.

Cancer-Related Fatigue

Up to 30% of breast cancers have cancer-related fatigue that persists for 5-10 years after diagnosis. Symptoms include weakness, impaired concentration, difficulty sleeping, decreased energy, fatigue lasting several hours after exertion, and tiredness that does not respond to sleep or rest. Physical therapists prescribe and supervise moderate intensity aerobic exercise, progressive strengthening, and interval training to help combat cancer-related fatigue. Physical therapists also monitor heart rate, perceived exertion, and other indicators to ensure the exercise is safe and of appropriate intensity to build strength and endurance without over training. Exercise has been shown to reduce fatigue levels by 40-50%, improve quality of life, and enhance energy and function.

Physical therapy plays a crucial role in the comprehensive care of individuals undergoing breast cancer treatment. By addressing physical limitations, managing side effects, and promoting overall well-being, physical therapists help you enhance your quality of life through every stage of your survivorship journey.

