

Exercise: Key To Improved Quality of Life for Cancer Patients

If you are currently undergoing or recovering from cancer treatment, the last thing you may want to do is exercise. To avoid fatigue, patients are often advised to rest and limit their daily activities. But exercise may be just what the doctor should order to help battle cancer related fatigue and other symptoms.

“The research looks promising that physical activity will contribute to an improved quality of life for cancer survivors,” says Colleen Doyle, MS, RD, director of nutrition and physical activity for the American Cancer Society (ACS).

Studies have shown that exercise reduces the levels of fatigue, weight gain, depression, anxiety and improves the ability to fight the debilitating effects of chemotherapy and radiation therapy.

Cancer Fitness is no Joke

A common joke regarding fitness states: one advantage of exercising daily is that you’ll surely die healthier! Even though most cancer patients disclose that they seriously think about their own mortality when diagnosed, the thought of exercising during and after chemotherapy and radiation treatment seems like a really big joke. But recent research is overwhelmingly indicating that exercise should be a part of *every* cancer patient’s plan of care, for life.

According to Dr. Anna L. Schwartz, author of *Cancer Fitness*, exercise has numerous benefits for all cancer patients. Not only does her research indicate that exercise is beneficial in helping those diagnosed with cancer through the emotional impact of treatment, but also it can reduce the side effects commonly associated with treatment; fatigue, nausea, pain, insomnia, constipation, and weight gain. It is because of these side effects that most patients dread their cancer treatment and may even discontinue it. In addition, cancer treatments may have long-term side effects that can be alleviated through exercise as well, such as osteoporosis and heart disease.

One of the most common myths that has been linked to cancer treatment is that patients should “rest when feeling fatigued.” But Dr. Schwartz, who is also a cancer survivor, says that, “Resting more and protecting oneself from physical activity actually has the opposite effect, promoting the decline in physical ability that leads to fatigue, weakness, and poor quality of life.”

Another myth that prevents cancer patients from exercising is the thought that in order to benefit from an exercise program, one must sweat or at least make their heart race. Also, Dr. Schwartz feels that most exercise dropouts fail because “they think back to what they used to do and decide they can just resume their old exercise program.” When they are unable to accomplish what they previously did, they feel unsuccessful and quit.

Dr. Schwartz says that a successful exercise program for cancer patients starts out very slowly, works in conjunction with their oncologist or health care provider, is individualized and based on their special needs, and is enjoyable. It can include yoga, walking, aerobics, and resistance strengthening or just simply bicycling while lying down. The idea is to basically move and increase slowly from there, because, movement *is* exercise. After all, a stronger cancer patient can deal with the effects of treatment and ultimately have a better quality of life.....and that’s no joke.