

BODY

v2n2 - Let's get moving

BY ANNA L. SCHWARTZ, FNP, PHD

Cancer is a diagnosis that often stops us in our tracks as we are blanketed with fear and uncertainty. There's so much information, advice and pressure to make critical decisions that will affect health and long-term outcomes. This stress nearly paralyzes some and makes doing the simplest tasks overwhelming.

Once in treatment, life seems more manageable, and a routine quickly ensues. But did anyone ever stop to talk to you about physical activity and exercise? Why not? Everyone tells you to "take care of yourself" and "get some rest," and of course there are all those pills to take, but what about taking care of the whole body and not just the disease?

Exercise is one of the most important things you can do for yourself during and many years after treatment. So, why doesn't the healthcare community talk to patients about this? Is it really a lack of time? Or lack of interest? Or awareness? Whatever the reason, all cancer survivors, whether actively receiving treatment or many years following treatment, should be told to exercise and given specific instructions, or referred to an exercise rehabilitation program to learn how to exercise around their physical limitations.

Scientific studies with cancer survivors during and after treatment consistently show many benefits of exercise — on heart and lung function, muscle strength, balance, fatigue, depression and quality of life. In fact, exercise is the best intervention for cancer-related fatigue. In my studies many people have told me they are "too tired to exercise," but once they muster the strength to get up and move around, they are amazed at how much better they feel both physically and emotionally. Exercise might not only help prevent many types of cancer, but it also has been associated with a reduced risk of recurrence, and an improved survival rate, for many cancers.

So, why is exercise being kept a secret from patients and survivors? Exercise as simple as walking around the house or block can make you feel better physically and emotionally. On some level, as we strengthen our bodies, our minds and spirits heal, too.

Take a positive step forward in your survivorship and start exercising. Begin slowly, well below the level of activity that you think you can do. Our brains always think we are superhuman, but bodies that have been resting need time to become strong and fit again. If you aren't sure where to start or what to do, or have lingering problems from treatment, such as lymphedema or numbness in your hands and feet, ask your physician for a referral to a cancer rehabilitation

program or a physical therapist who can guide you to start an exercise program safely.

Let's be frank: Many of you find exercise completely unappealing and would prefer to sit and watch TV or work at your computers. But, if you start slowly and don't push yourself to the point of exhaustion and pain, then exercise won't be unpleasant. Find a friend or take your dog and head out the door for a short walk. The distance doesn't matter, and if you only walk to the corner and back, that's OK. It's the first step in moving forward to a healthier survivorship.

Goals help keep you motivated and give you a reason to get up and move. Set short-term, very achievable goals and maybe even set a long-term goal of walking in a cancer charity event. It's amazing the power and energy you will feel walking and being with other survivors. That energy will carry you forward to continue your commitment to physical activity.

There's no question that it's hard to change your lifestyle from being sedentary to being active, but if you stick with exercise for even 10 or 12 weeks, you will see impressive changes in your body, mind

and spirit that will buoy you in your quest to being the healthiest survivor you can be. Getting through cancer takes determination, courage and will that gives you the inner strength to take the steps to live a healthy, physically active life. When you're physically and mentally strong you can live a full and meaningful life, and isn't that what we all want for ourselves and our loved ones? h

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