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Taking Baby Steps

BY CHARLOTTE HUFF

Amid the rollercoaster of cancer treatment, an exercise regimen may seem like a distant memory or mirage, even to once physically fit patients.

Don't give up. By staying as active as possible, patients can better maintain mobility and strength, and perhaps ease anxiety as well, clinicians say. "Patients will tell me, 'I feel much better after taking a walk,' " says Eileen Trombetta, RD, LDN, a nutrition support coordinator at Fox Chase Cancer Center in Philadelphia.

Begin with an activity or exercise that seems manageable, suggests Priscilla Furth, MD, a professor at Georgetown University's Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center. "We're not trying to get [a patient's] heart rate up to any particular place," she says. "What we're trying to do is maintain mobility and muscle strength."

Not surprisingly, walking is a frequently recommended activity. Before striding too far, get properly fitted for the right pair of sneakers, as chemotherapy can sometimes cause nerve damage in the toes, Furth says.

For those who prefer the water, walking in a pool is a low-gravity alternative, clinicians say. Patients not accustomed to regular exercise can still get moving by gardening or wandering the shopping mall.

Before walking or swimming, talk to your physician. If your skin's surface has been affected by treatment, such as radiation or surgery, you may be more vulnerable to contracting an infection, Furth says.

Exercises also can be performed while sitting or lying in bed. Yoga moves are particularly helpful in promoting flexibility and strength, along with relaxation. Since patients may not feel like going to class, Furth provides exercise handouts they can follow at home.

Don't push the envelope and don't concede defeat, she says. "Everyone can do some exercise, but it might be very little. And that's OK. Think about what you can do."