

Specialized exercise helps N.J. cancer patients regain strength, sense of well-being

exerciseA.jpg

Carol Michaels, left, a certified cancer exercise specialist, works with patient Colleen Russo at the Carol G. Simon Cancer Center in Morristown. (Amanda Brown)

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IN APRIL 2013, MORRISTOWN RESIDENT COLLEEN RUSSO completed the last of 37 radiation therapy sessions that followed surgery to battle invasive breast cancer. At first, she felt fine. It seemed she was not going to be plagued by the fatigue that sets in for many undergoing radiation treatment. A few months later, however, the exhaustion hit just as she was facing some difficult family matters.

Russo realized she needed to concentrate on caring for herself, so she followed the recommendation of a fellow radiation patient and began attending a support group at Morristown Medical Center's Carol G. Simon Cancer Center. At the center, she also found a handout about the benefits of cancer exercise, specifically designed to help people recovering from the disease gain strength and stamina. The flier also advertised free classes at the center, led by certified cancer exercise specialist Carol Michaels.

So Russo started working with Michaels in the classes, doing Pilates one day a week and strength building on another. More than a year later, she's still at it and says she feels better, has more energy and is "in a much happier place."

Cancer exercise is "improving (my) balance, improving flexibility. The muscle tone is better," Russo says. "The exercise is so good to keep you moving, and forces you to read your body and know what's going on."

It's a given that exercise is important for anyone to maintain good health. Now, research is pointing to it being particularly vital for optimal recovery from cancer, which, along with treatment to combat it, can cause a range of physical and psychological side effects.

Studies also suggest that exercise can even decrease the risk of recurrence of certain cancers.

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In January, The Wall Street Journal reported on a study that found a 30 percent to 40 percent drop in the risk for breast cancer, as well as better survival rates, among women who exercise. An article appearing in the medical journal *Current Treatment Options in Oncology* states "there is now irrefutable evidence from large prospective studies that regular exercise post-diagnosis will actually increase survivorship by 50 (percent) to 60 percent with the

FINDING A PRO

In 2009, the ACS and American College of Sports Medicine became more aware of exercise programs geared to cancer survivors and instituted a joint online certification program focusing on such areas as exercise physiology, health appraisal, clinical exercise testing and injury prevention. Enrollees must have basic health instructor training in fitness and exercise prescription.

The Cancer Exercise Training Institute also offers certification to health and fitness professionals through workshops and home study.

Both the ACSM and CETI feature provider databases on their websites:

- certification.acsm.org/pro-finder

- thecancerspecialist.com/cetnew/AboutUs.aspx

— J.J.

strongest evidence currently for breast and colorectal patients."

The American Cancer Society's 2012 activity guidelines for cancer survivors noted that "prospective, observational studies have demonstrated that physical activity after cancer diagnosis is associated with a reduced risk of cancer recurrence ... among multiple cancer survivor groups, including breast, colorectal, prostate and ovarian cancer."

"The recommendation for cancer patients used to be rest, rest, rest," says Brittany Raup, a certified exercise physiologist and cancer-exercise trainer. "Now, they're saying, no, you need to be doing (exercise) as well, and you can do high-intensity exercise, as long as there are no other contraindications." Raup coordinates PREP (Physician-Referred Exercise Program), which features a cancer survivorship track, at Inspira Health Network's Fitness Connection in Vineland.

The wrong exercise or exercise done incorrectly, however, can wreak further havoc on an already-compromised body. A cancer exercise specialist takes into consideration the patient's medical condition, treatments and side effects, and then tailors an exercise program for them. If, for example, a woman has had TRAM flap surgery, which uses abdominal muscle to build a breast mound, she would not be able to do many traditional core exercises.

Carol Michaels, the exercise specialist, explains to patient Colleen Russo how an exercise ball can help her gain strength and stamina.
Amanda Brown

"As an exercise specialist, my goal for a person who's had that type of operation is to strengthen the other muscles," says Michaels. "I would strengthen the obliques to compensate for the

change in placement of (the abdominal muscle)."

Michaels, in addition to working at Morristown Medical Center, provides a cancer exercise program in her Short Hills studio, as well as at Gilda's Club in Newark and the Berkeley Heights YMCA.

Patients must receive medical clearance from their doctor before starting a cancer-exercise program, which typically begins with a review of their treatments, medications and side effects, as well as an assessment of their range of motion, balance, posture and endurance — all often negatively affected by treatment. Workouts can feature relaxation breathing, cardio, strength and flexibility exercises, as well as stretching — all modified to the individual.

Patients who have used these techniques can experience improved posture, balance and body awareness, and increased strength, flexibility and range of motion. They also may discover a boost in their mood, confidence and self-esteem, and a reduction in fatigue, stress and depression. "The research definitely supports that," says Colleen Doyle, managing director of nutrition and physical activity for the American Cancer Society. "Being active during and after cancer treatment has a positive impact on all of those things."

Patients also frequently lose fat while building muscle mass and bone density, and may even tolerate chemotherapy better.

Raup and Michaels advise their clients to exercise two to three times a week at a minimum, ideally at the time of day when they have the most energy. But "you have to be very flexible and adaptable, because every day, their fatigue and pain levels vary," says Michaels, stressing that strength training should be done slowly and stretching should be performed daily.

And while patients can do cancer exercise in one-on-one sessions, by participating in classes, they can reap benefits similar to those derived from a support group. Patients "really develop strong friendships and camaraderie," says

Michaels.

Evelyn Acevedo of Vineland, on treadmill, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2013, and had surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. She now works out regularly with certified exercise physiologist and cancer-exercise trainer Brittany Raup at Inspira Health Network's Fitness Connection facility in Vineland.

Avi Steinhardt

Evelyn Acevedo, of Vineland, can vouch for that. After being diagnosed with Stage 1A breast cancer in 2013, she had surgery, chemotherapy and radiation — a treatment course that, coupled with caring for her dying mother, took both a physical and psychological toll on her. "I was, basically, like

numb. I was just going through the motions. And I was like, I don't know what to do next," she remembers.

When she came across a flier for Inspira's PREP (she works in the business office at Inspira Health Center Bridgeton), she immediately thought it would help her get stronger and restore her energy. Acevedo started the program with Raup in December and has flourished. She has lost fat, increased her muscle mass, experienced a tremendous rise in energy and made great friends.

"We talk about our personal lives ... what we've been through and what they're going through now," Acevedo says of her classmates. "I can relate to them and they can relate to me. I don't feel funny going in and not having all my hair yet. ... I never feel out of place or uncomfortable there."

Insurers do not cover or reimburse for cancer exercise, unless provided by a medical office, according to Andrea Leonard, of the Cancer Exercise Training Institute in Portland, Ore. While fees vary depending on the facility, specialist and location, the ACS' Doyle says a number of group programs are offered without charge at hospitals and cancer centers.

The consensus is that such exercise programs can greatly improve the quality of life for people recovering from cancer. "It's such a positive thing they can do for themselves," Raup says. "I just encourage people to treat exercise like they treat (their) medicine. You have to do it and it's going to have good benefits for you."

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