

Post-cancer fitness brings new life for survivors

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LONGPORT, N.J. (AP) — Two years ago, Allison Kashon tried to hit the gym three times a week. She rode her bike regularly and got her cardio in on treadmills and ellipticals. All the stuff to keep a body healthy, she says.

But in December of 2013, the Longport resident had to look at her health in a whole new way.

She was diagnosed with stage1B triple negative breast cancer, and underwent a double mastectomy. Hardcore chemotherapy from March to mid-September left her body weak.

"I went in for my surgery, and after that I couldn't lift my arms," Kashon, 45, who went through a year of treatments, told The Press of Atlantic City (<http://bit.ly/1eV0lzQ>). "With the treatments, the doctors told me I would feel like I got hit by a truck. That's a gross understatement," she said.

"I felt like I got hit by a freight train."

Knowing what cancer might do to the body and mind, Kashon was determined to try to keep in shape.

Before her chemotherapy, she reached out to Gilda's Club of South Jersey, which recommended yoga classes to keep up her core strength and to better handle stress. Kashon lost her auburn-red hair to chemotherapy, but she didn't worry about that at Gilda's Club. She knew the other survivors wouldn't judge her.

On the days when she couldn't go to the gym because of her compromised immune system, she followed yoga classes broadcasted on Comcast. She could stretch for 20 minutes, on a good day.

Now, six months after the end of her treatments, she's strong enough to take on more.

On Sunday, she joined other cancer survivors on the crew of the Gilda's Club dragon boat in the bay in Ventnor. She had been told that paddling cold help relieve her lymphedema, a type of swelling in her right hand.

She became a Gladiator, the nickname given to the rowers on that particular boat.

For some South Jersey cancer survivors like Kashon, exercise during and after treatments has helped get back the bodies that withered in hospital beds. Many of them find that working out also helps increase their energy and lift their spirits.

In 2010, the American College of Sports Medicine called for updated exercise recommendations for cancer patients. At the time, some doctors were advising patients to take it easy and avoid any kind of physical activity. But a study by Macmillan Cancer Support, a charity based in the United Kingdom, revealed that exercise actually helped some cancer patients live longer.

There's a change that occurs in people who face a potentially fatal disease when they start an exercise regimen, said Carol Michaels, founder of the Recovery Fitness exercise program geared toward cancer survivors.

Michaels, based in Short Hills in Essex County, was a personal trainer. When several members of her family were diagnosed with cancer, she developed a program to help them and the increasing number of clients coming to her for exercise advice.

Figuring out the appropriate workout routine for those going through and those coming out of cancer treatments is a gradual process, she said. Most of it starts with simple breathing exercises and stretches.

"It's a little frustrating for people who were avid exercisers," she said. "Even if you walk around the house or down the block, it's a start. You start slow and you progress slow."

The American Cancer Society recommends physical activity to fit the needs of each individual patient. Those with weak immune systems shouldn't work out in a public place like the gym.

Even people who were not too concerned with fitness before their diagnoses have found that exercise could be motivational and enjoyable during recovery.

Diana Gonzalez admits she wasn't the most active kid in her high school, but the Pleasantville resident knew she had to change her ways after going through chemotherapy and radiation for cancer in her reproductive system about three years ago.

She started slowly, with light weightlifting at Island Gym & Fitness. Little by little, her strength grew.

"I just felt so deflated, like I couldn't do anything" during treatments, she said. "I lost myself. I needed to do this for me."

Eventually, Gonzalez wanted to challenge herself. She moved her talents to Oceanside Wellness & Sport, right on the border of her hometown and Egg Harbor Township. She said she was the first woman to take part in the gym's Gorilla Extreme class, a conditioning and weight training program.

These days, the 128-pound Gonzalez can dead lift about twice her weight.

"You have the tangible benefits, you start to look good," she said, laughing in the gym on a recent Thursday morning. "But working out, it brightens you. It brought passion back into what I was doing. I was living again."

Both Gonzalez and Kashon described the fitness communities that came to support them. Gonzalez met the man who would end up becoming her boyfriend— head trainer at Oceanside, Sean Sutton —and a woman in her 60s whom she regularly joins for dinner.

For Kashon, the men and women in the Gilda's Club yoga classes encouraged her to keep going.

"There is a powerlessness you feel when you are diagnosed. It pervades everything. And on some levels, exercise for me was a little bit of regaining my own power," she said. "I'm not where I was before, but I'm starting to get there."