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Exercise: a Key to Physical and Emotional Recovery

by [Carol Michaels](#) •



Cancer survivors can manage stress and fear through a well-structured cancer exercise program that enables the participants to feel more relaxed, and simply better. The benefit to patients goes way beyond their physical fitness (which in and of itself is no small feat). Not only do patients improve physically, but also they begin to feel better about themselves and more hopeful about the future. The stronger and more mobile that they become, the more they are able to imagine beating their cancer. This creates a positive cycle that fills them with hope and heals not only their external ailment but also their internal and psychological wounds.

When some people hear the word exercise, they immediately think about difficult gym class exercise or boot camp. Exercises for cancer survivors should be gentle, fun and effective. They are initially not high intensity. Exercise might be the last thing on the mind of a cancer patient, but a good fitness program will help build up strength, improve mood and help recovery. Research suggests that exercise can decrease the risk or recurrence for some cancers. This is very powerful information for survivors and helps them to manage their fears.

There is an emotional toll that cancer survivors face in addition to the physical one. A

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cancer diagnosis can cause depression, anger, anxiety, fear and stress. Proper breathing techniques and stretching can improve the psychological recovery. Breathing can help reduce stress and anxiety. When feeling stressed, we usually take shallow breaths.

During exercises using relaxation breathing, use full lung capacity and breathe slowly and deeply. Inhale for 5 seconds and fill the torso up with air, then exhale from the lower abdomen for 5 seconds, pressing the navel in towards the spine. Imagine tension and stress leaving the body with each exhalation. Cancer survivors should begin relaxation breathing immediately after surgery, as it allows the focus of all energy on healing. A stretching program will restore mobility in the chest and back that allows for freer movement of the lungs and diaphragm.

Exercise is one thing that a cancer survivor can control. It is empowering. Physical activity can decrease depression and anxiety. The participants in a well-designed cancer exercise programs reduce stress, increase confidence and build positive health habits. The participants also gain endurance, increase their energy level and decrease the fatigue that may be caused by treatments.

Many variables determine the exercises that are effective and safe for the particular situation. Every day brings new challenges and new accomplishments for the cancer patient. It is important to be able to modify the exercises to fit the needs at a given time.

Pain and fatigue levels can change from day to day, and even from hour to hour. Track energy levels throughout the day to determine the best time to schedule exercise sessions. Common sense and listening to your body are of utmost importance. An exercise routine must be customized due to the numerous physical and psychological side effects.

After DIEP, TRAM flap, Lat flap, implant, and other reconstruction surgeries, it is helpful to exercise with a group of women who have similar initial limitations. The camaraderie and support of a group will make taking care of your health enjoyable and fun. Many people do not feel comfortable returning to their gyms right after surgery or treatment. Gym classes can be large and impersonal. A cancer exercise class provides a place to exercise and feel comfortable without a wig.

Remember, your exercise will bring you BIG rewards:

- Have fun, get motivated, and be inspired
- Improve health and fitness with other cancer survivors
- Improve posture, balance, and body awareness
- Increase strength, flexibility, and range of motion
- Increase energy levels and endurance
- Improve sleep and reduce stress
- Weight control
- Improve ability to tolerate cancer treatments
- Increase self-confidence and sense of well-being



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