

Activity for Cancer Survivors

by Jacqui Errico and Debbie Hughes

In June 2010, the American College of Sports Medicine changed its guidelines for people with cancer from recommending that bed rest is best to encouraging survivors to “avoid inactivity.” ACSM’s updated recommendation on exercise and physical activity for cancer survivors follows the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans (health.gov/paguidelines), with specific adaptations based on the disease.

These guidelines advise 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity and at least two days per week of moderate-intensity muscle strengthening activities that involve all major muscle groups. This new mindset is a result of overwhelming scientific research suggesting exercise for a person living with cancer can improve everything from treatment-related fatigue to survivorship of the disease.



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Anywhere from 60 percent to 100 percent of cancer survivors experience debilitating fatigue at some time during or after treatment. Studies show that survivors who engaged in an exercise program reported a significant reduction in treatment-related fatigue and indicated that as exercise duration

increased, the intensity of fatigue decreased.

In addition to fatigue, cancer survivors often experience depression, anxiety, and mood and emotional disturbances. Research has shown that cancer survivors who exercise regularly benefit with a positive boost in mood, lower rates of depression, and a better outlook on life. The Society of Behavioral Medicine recently presented a study concluding that exercise seems to be the key to helping women with breast cancer combat depression. Experts also found that the more regular exercise survivors got, the less depressed they felt.

Further benefits of exercise include reduced incidence of nausea (by as much as 50 percent), improved quality

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of life, higher tolerance to chemotherapy, improved sleep, increased self-esteem, and a decreased risk for osteoporosis. All of these benefits can be accomplished with as little as 10 minutes of exercise a day.

Exercise offers many more benefits than those mentioned, and with each study, proof is mounting that exercising during treatment is essential. Not only is exercise beneficial during treatment, but it also greatly increases survival after treatment. In 2005, *JAMA*, the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, stated that breast cancer survivors who exercised three to five hours a week experienced a 50-percent decrease in mortality rates. It is clear that maintaining an active lifestyle and



healthy weight is essential for cancer survivors.

Prior to starting any exercise program (whether self-monitored or in

a group setting), you should first get medical clearance from your doctor. Then proceed slowly and progress at a pace that fits your lifestyle. The goal is to “avoid inactivity” and to build up to the ACSM guidelines according to your ability.

Jacqui Errico and Debbie Hughes, founders of the nonprofit organization Strength for Life, are certified cancer exercise specialists who offer free exercise classes to cancer survivors. Strength for Life also provides wellness retreats at no cost to cancer survivors. For more information about Strength for Life’s free exercise classes or wellness retreats, visit StrengthForLifeNY.org or call (631) 675-6513.

The American College of Sports Medicine’s guidelines can be found online at acsm.org by entering *exercise guidelines for cancer survivors* in the search bar.