

Health & Fitness

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Book helps with fitness after cancer

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Annie Toglia found out in 1996 that she had breast cancer. So she did something about it.



Annie Toglia

First she dealt with the news in a personal manner, undergoing two mastec-

tomies, reconstruction, chemotherapy, radiation and a stem cell transplant.

Next, she used her experience to help others.

Toglia, of Bronxville, N.Y., was in her 40s and a sports trainer who had just received certification to design programs for elite athletes when she was diagnosed. Her personal fitness level at the time, she says, was high.

Following breast cancer surgery, "Problems started two days later," she says. "First was the weakness. I couldn't stand up straight and had a burning sensation under

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my arms from lymph node removal. I found it difficult to lift my left arm. I didn't believe how limited I was, so I kept trying to do stuff I wasn't ready to do."

Her state of mind? "I was completely horrified," she says. "I could hardly walk. And I went in there with pumped muscles."

Her horror gave way to action. "I made arrangements for a physical therapist to come to my home after being in the hospital for six days," Toglia says. "Before that started, when I first got home I started taking big rubber bands, looping my arms through them, and moving my arms. Scar tissue had already grown so much; within two weeks I had scar bands forming that my doctor had to break to get me better range of motion."

Thanks to an informed physical therapist and self-experimentation with exercises, she started getting results. Now, she says, "I am cancer free, seven years out of stage 4 [breast cancer]. I had a little scare last year but it was nothing. I have full range of motion; I got it a couple of months after starting physical therapy."

With her hard-won knowledge and help from her medical team, Toglia developed a rehabilitative program for recovering breast cancer patients. *Staying Abreast: Rehabilitation Exercises for Breast Cancer Surgery* (\$60 including shipping, visit www.stayingabreast.com), is her breast cancer exercise workbook, chronologically formatted and designed to aid in recovery from breast cancer surgery, reconstruction and follow-up treatments.

The 111-page book is spiral-bound so that it can stand up for easier viewing during use. Each

of the 11 separate programs contains 7-15 exercises, fitness guidelines, postures and recommendations specific to each program, verbal exercise instructions and color illustrations that show the beginning and ending of each movement.

Now a medical exercise specialist, Toglia wrote *Staying Abreast* with specific goals in mind, including:

- Preventing lymphedema (abnormal swelling of the arm) by promoting drainage of lymph fluids.

- Preventing formation of scar tissue and frozen shoulder (trouble lifting the arm above the head, reaching across the body or behind the back).

- Restoration of upright posture and maintenance of range of motion, strength and flexibility.

- Improvement of lung capacity, cardiovascular and cardiopulmonary fitness.

- Improvement in endorphin levels to relieve tension, depression, weakness and fatigue.

"With a mastectomy, it's very likely people will have limitations in range of motion," Toglia says. "With certain people it doesn't affect them very much. Some don't know it's something they can prevent or cure. There's a possibility you'll have a totally frozen shoulder the way I did, and others are totally fine. I don't think it follows a pattern at all."

Staying Abreast is divided into phases:

Phase 1 — Basic post-surgery exercises to prevent swelling, tightness, frozen shoulder and formation of scar tissue, to relieve muscle pain, and to promote healing.

Phase 2 (up to six weeks post-surgery) — Slow controlled movements focusing on the upper body to counteract weakness and loss of flexibility; deep breathing for relaxation, and

slow walks to relieve stiffness, prevent muscle atrophy and increase physical endurance.

Phase 3 (6-10 weeks post-surgery) — More challenging upper body exercises and moderate aerobic activities, gentle flexibility training and strength training, and swimming (breast stroke and side stroke only).

Phase 4 (10 weeks post-surgery) — More active aerobics and moderate-intensity walking program.

Beyond Phase 4 — Cross-training aerobics and more challenging strength, endurance and flexibility exercises for upper and lower body.

Above and Beyond — Interval circuit training combining strength exercises with aerobic conditioning.

Although her book focuses on post-treatment training, Toglia wants medical professionals to encourage patients to start exercising before breast cancer surgery or treatment. "That would help them a lot," she says, and would establish an exercise routine that could be resumed after surgery, which is easier than starting an exercise regimen from scratch.

For those who find a post-treatment exercise program challenging, "the most important thing is to keep your spirits up," she says. "The pain will be more miserable if you don't do it. It's painful when you do it, but the more stagnant you are, the worse it will become. Once the effects start hitting you, they're going to escalate. A frozen shoulder is one thing, but what is worse is how the back can be affected," which can make even simple movements difficult.

As a cancer survivor, Toglia is a firm believer in cancer-fighting events such as the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, taking place in Little Rock Saturday. "One of the most meaningful things to me in the world is to see all those people, the spirit, the joy; it brings me to tears," she says.

