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Prime time By Jane Oppermann

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We have, indeed, come a long way. Especially when it comes to breast cancer.

But Annie Toglia wants to go a little further.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women - 200,000 will be diagnosed with the disease in the United States this year. It's the leading cause of cancer death for women ages 40 to 55.

But early detection and improved treatment have resulted in fewer deaths. Eighty-five percent of breast cancer patients now survive at least five years, according to the American Cancer Society. Living longer after diagnosis and treatment, women now are seeking ways to improve their quality of life.

That's why Toglia is getting the word out about the benefits of exercise after breast cancer. After two mastectomies, multiple courses of chemotherapy, many other treatments and two stem-cell transplants, the New York medical exercise specialist knows first hand about the ravages of the disease.

But when she looked for an exercise program to help rebuild her strength after her surgeries she found little information.

So Toglia wrote "Staying Abreast, Rehabilitation Exercises for Breast Cancer Surgery." A Web site, www.stayingabreast.com, also provides an overview of the program, which is geared for every stage of recovery and includes exercises for women still undergoing chemotherapy, hormone replacement or radiation. The book is designed for use by patients after consulting with their physicians or with support from physical therapists or medical exercise specialists.

"Most doctors simply aren't aware of the benefits that are achieved for their patients through exercise," Toglia said. "I have the background in sports medicine and I've gone through breast cancer. It seemed only logical that I would be the one to write this book."

Some cancer specialists wonder why a book like this didn't come along sooner.

"If the medical community can perform surgery on a football player's knee and rehab him back into condition so he can withstand a 250-pound linebacker coming at him," asks physical therapist Mike Jones, "then why can't it develop a rehab program for a breast cancer survivor so she can reach for a coffee cup from the cabinet, so she can carry her briefcase or open a door?"

Jones is president of the North American Academy of Health Fitness & Rehabilitation Professionals in Sacramento, Calif.

Dr. Barry D. Boyd, a medical oncologist and director of integrative oncology at Greenwich Hospital in Greenwich, Conn., believes many doctors simply don't understand the mechanisms of exercise and how it affects cancer.

"It's all about insulin levels," explained Boyd, who treated the comedian Gilda Radner. "There's a growing body of information out there on the breast cancer-insulin connection. Exercise helps keep insulin levels down and that decreases your risk of developing cancer and may keep it from re-occurring."

Twenty years ago, after a woman had a mastectomy, she was instructed not to move her arm for fear she'd develop lymphedema, swelling in the arm caused by an accumulation of lymph fluid. Women were discouraged from using even small hand exercise balls and were told to gradually ease into simple exercises like shoulder shrugs, walking fingers up a wall or brushing their hair. Lack of movement often resulted in a "frozen shoulder" and significant loss of function.

Today, doctors provide their patients with a set of simple exercises to perform at home. Many don't prescribe even one session of physical therapy to help patients learn proper exercise techniques.

Post-mastectomy exercises focusing on just the shoulder and upper body fail to address the health of the entire body or quality of life after cancer, experts say.

As breast cancer treatment evolves, more research is revealing the benefits of exercise. A study in the journal *The Physician and Sportsmedicine* found that moderate aerobic exercise three to five days a week, combined with some resistance training, can result in less fatigue, insomnia and nausea, as well as improved mental health.

As Toglia underwent treatment one day, a woman came up to her and said, "You're the woman who cured my frozen shoulder. I can't thank you enough."

"That's enough to make my day," said Toglia. "It may not seem like much to most people, but just a few exercises performed daily for a total of 15 to 20 minutes can effect amazing gains in strength, flexibility and endurance for a post-op patient. And even during radiation or chemotherapy, weakness, pain and fatigue can be reduced if people commit to a program of mild exercises on a regular basis."

• *"Staying Abreast: Rehabilitation Exercises for Breast Cancer Surgery"* costs \$55 and can be ordered through www.stayingabreast.com or by writing to Annie Toglia, 1470 Midland Ave., Apt. 2-0, Bronxville, NY 10708.

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