

Stride into recovery

Exercise may be one of the most crucial elements for restoring health, fitness and therapy experts say.

By LISA LIDDANE THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Sometimes, exercise is the last thing on the mind of a woman who is undergoing or has just completed breast-cancer treatment. After all, chemo therapy may leave exhaustion and nausea in its wake. The chest, shoulder, back or arm may feel too painful, weak or stiff to move after a mastectomy or lymph-node removal.

Yet exercise may be one of the most important elements of a prescription for optimum recovery, say physical therapists and personal-fitness trainers who specialize in post-breast-cancer therapy and training.

In many cases, the interest in exercise is driven by patients who want to do something to feel better and have some control over their recovery.

There aren't many studies examining the relationship between exercise and recovery specifically from breast cancer, though more research is now being conducted, said Josie Gardiner, a personal-fitness trainer based in Boston who is releasing an exercise video and book on the subject this year.

Why exercise? A 2001 study in the journal *Cancer Practice* showed that women undergoing breast-cancer treatment who walked for 90 minutes on three or more days per week significantly reduced fatigue and emotional distress, increased the ability to move and function, and improved their quality of life.

"It hastens your recovery, it helps relieve depression when you feel so broken up inside," said Annie Toglia, a medical-exercise specialist in Bronxville, N.Y., and breast-cancer survivor. "Then there's the endorphin release from exercise that makes you feel better," said Toglia, author of "Staying Abreast: Rehabilitation Exercises for Breast Cancer Surgery."

Patients should get clearance from their doctor before beginning exercise.

A sensible exercise plan for breast cancer has four elements: **Proper breathing:** Learning this is one of the first steps a patient should take. "Using abdominal breathing is beneficial in terms of handling pain, setting the rhythm to pump the lymphatic system, helping to expel the effects of anesthesia," said Joan Pagano, a personal-fitness trainer who has consulted for Share, a New York-based support group for women with breast and/or ovarian cancer.

Practice slower, deeper breathing that brings air to the lungs and the abdominal area.

Cardiovascular conditioning: Strengthens the heart and lungs, which is important for the body's recovery. "Walking is the No. 1 choice for many cancer patients," Gardiner said. It's a simple exercise that's relatively safe for most people." And it's particularly better if the walking takes place outside, said Dr. Jane Kakkis, breast-cancer surgeon at Orange Coast Memorial Medical Center in Fountain Valley. Being outdoors can help lift one's spirits. Walking regularly with a supportive friend or loved one also can boost morale, Kakkis said. It's important to start slowly and gradually build intensity and endurance.

Restoring range of motion/ improving flexibility: Especially essential for women who have undergone surgery. Exercises target stiffness, pain and limited range of movement. Preferably done under the guidance of a physical therapist experienced in breast-cancer rehab, because the exercises have to be tailored to the individual.

Strength training: Undertaken after gaining flexibility. Patients who have had surgery, no matter how minor, should consult an exercise specialist with experience in breast-cancer rehabilitation, said Leslie Waltke, physical therapist at Cancer Rehabilitation Specialists in Milwaukee, Wis. She said that when strength training is incorrectly performed or overdone, it may increase the risk of lymphedema, the swelling in the affected arm.