



Physical Therapy and Wellness News . . .

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[Contact: Margaret Cook, Peak Physical Therapy 781.267.6755](#)

The Benefits of Physical Therapy During Breast Cancer Treatment

Breast cancer treatment can often include surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation, and while these methods are necessary for healing, they can still cause some adverse side effects that leave an impact on the patient's function long after treatment ends. Fortunately, some of these resulting symptoms can be treated effectively with physical therapy, helping to improve the patient's quality of life. Some of the most common issues seen in physical therapy after breast cancer treatment are a decrease in shoulder range of motion and strength on the surgical side, reduced aerobic capacity, and lymphedema.

Patients that undergo a surgical procedure, such as a mastectomy, are more susceptible to developing surgical scar tissue, muscle weakness, and postural changes that can negatively affect shoulder range of motion and functional strength. Physical therapy can be very effective in helping to restore that range of motion through passive stretching and assisted exercises. As range of motion is gradually restored, the patient is then able to begin a strengthening program to improve upper extremity and postural strength, allowing for return to uninhibited daily activities such as, showering, dressing, and reaching.

In addition to deficits in upper extremity strength, patients often experience a reduction in overall cardiorespiratory fitness due to bed rest. Cancer patients often note a profound increase in their fatigue level which limits their ability to perform an exercise program independently. As a result, physical therapy can be very helpful in guiding these patients through a conditioning program that is organized in a stepwise manner, gradually increasing levels of intensity and time. In addition to a lowered aerobic capacity, patients often show a decrease in muscular strength and bone density throughout the body, increasing the risk of falls and subsequent injury. A physical therapist can help to design an individualized treatment program focused on strengthening the involved muscles, and improving balance control.

Lastly, lymphedema is another side effect of breast cancer treatment that can limit a patient's return to prior level of function. Lymphedema is a retention of fluid that occurs when the lymphatic system is compromised, most often due to surgery and radiation therapy. Because the body's lymphatic system can no longer maintain the normal tissue fluid balance, patients often experience a heavy swollen limb that can also limit functional ability. Treatment often includes compression bandaging, therapeutic exercises, and manual lymph drainage, a type of massage performed by some physical therapists.

Breast cancer treatment is very difficult and unfortunately, some of the side effects can last long after the procedures are complete. Physical therapy, however, can be very helpful in addressing these issues. Through monitored strengthening exercises, massage, and stretching, patients can regain some of the function lost through the medical treatment process. Physical therapy is an integral part of overall breast cancer rehabilitation, helping to improve patients overall function and quality of life.

By Katy Mercurio, DPT, CSCS at Peak Physical Therapy
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