

Women Living with Breast Cancer

Physical therapists play a key role in restoring function and assisting breast cancer patients' return to their daily life and routines, says the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA).

“Often the first stage in treatment for breast cancer is surgery,’ says Elizabeth Augustine, PT, MS, president of APTA’s Oncology Section. “Rehabilitation after surgery is a crucial first step in the road to recovery for women living with this disease. Correctly managing post-surgical care is a critical part of oncology rehabilitation.”

After surgery, patients often experience a loss of range of motion and function in the shoulder and arms. Physical therapists help patients perform stretching and strengthening exercises to regain lost range of motion and function. Physical therapists will also perform scar massage to keep tissue mobile and supple during healing and to prevent the scar tissue from adhering to the tissue beneath it, called a scar contracture. If not prevented, scar contractures can severely limit the range of motion and function of the affected arm and shoulder. Many physical therapists also create cardiovascular exercise programs for post-surgical patients and those dealing with fatigue caused by chemotherapy and/or radiation.

Breast cancer is the second most common cancer among women as well as the second leading cause of cancer death in women. One in three women who undergo an axillary dissection, removal of the lymph nodes near the armpit, for breast cancer will develop lymphedema of the arm, a chronic and irreversible condition that can develop weeks, months, or even years after surgery or radiation. Lymphedema causes swelling, reduced oxygen to the tissues and, in some cases, a serious infection. Lymphedema can be managed and greatly improved through a comprehensive physical therapy program.

“The good news is that the majority of women will not develop lymphedema,” says Augustine. “The bad news is that no one can predict who will develop lymphedema or when, because it [lymphedema] can be triggered by a trauma to the limb such as an injury or injection.”

Physical therapists, or PT’s, manage lymphedema by using a combination of techniques. PT’s perform manual lymphatic drainage massage, which works to push lymph fluid towards functioning lymph nodes. Low-stretch compression bandaging and properly fitted compression garments are worn on the affected areas. After massage, drainage and pressure garments, exercises, such as shoulder raises and bicep curls, for the arm and shoulder can be performed. “I counsel my patients to be mindful and keep the arm active and mobile, while properly outfitted in the pressure garment,” adds Augustine.

There are many components to breast cancer rehabilitation. “Breast cancer patients should ask their physicians whether physical therapy would be helpful in their case,” Augustine says. Physical therapy interventions will vary depending on the consequences

of the medical treatments necessitated by the stage of the disease. Ideally, a PT works with a patient pre operatively to establish baseline measurements, determine patient goals, and educate the patient about what to expect from physical therapy after surgery, chemotherapy and /or radiation therapy.