

PHYSICAL THERAPY

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The Benefits of Physical Therapy for Cancer Patients

Approximately 1 million people are diagnosed with cancer annually. In addition, there are presently more than 8 million people living in the U.S. with a history of cancer.' Given the above, it stands to reason that a large portion of the population may be suffering from the side effects of cancer and its treatments.

Pain is one of the symptoms often associated with cancer. Patients may also experience fatigue, weakness, decreased endurance, and insomnia. Swelling of a limb may also occur, adding to a patient's discomfort. These symptoms may, in turn, contribute to decreased function, impaired gait, decreased functional independence, and diminished quality of life. Along with the medications used to combat these side effects, physical therapy (PT) can also be an effective way of minimizing these symptoms and maintaining one's quality of life.

Pain is a common symptom of cancer and its treatment. Pain can be managed with medication; however, PT can be a complementary treatment. Modalities and soft massage can increase comfort in a painful patient, as well as gentle range of motion, exercises and positioning. Relaxation techniques may also be utilized in controlling pain, as well as reducing fatigue.

Fatigue is probably the most prominent symptom experienced by a patient who is undergoing cancer treatment. It has

been shown that "physical exercise programs help prevent the manifestation and reduce the intensity of cancer-related fatigue." The fatigue seems to be best managed when the patient exercises at a moderate level.

Another side effect of cancer treatments is lymph edema. The lymph system is part of the body's immune system. Body fluids are strained through the lymph nodes where the body can weed out and destroy foreign bodies. Commonly, with breast cancer, the lymph nodes in the arm are removed, as this tends to be a site where cancer cells accumulate. When these nodes are removed, the lymphatic fluid does not drain well and lymph edema can occur in the arm. The accumulation of cancer cells in the lymph nodes may also contribute to a back up of fluids in a limb. Lymph edema presents as swelling and can be somewhat controlled with positioning, modalities (such as electrical stimulation), massage and compressive wrapping.

While most of the above treatments primarily apply to minimally or moderately involved patients, advanced cancer patients and their caregivers may also benefit from PT. In this case, education is the primary focus. The patient and caregivers are educated in positioning, transfer techniques, bed mobility, and gentle techniques to offer the patient the most possible comfort, while maintaining the highest quality of

life, and promoting functional independence.

Once a patient is finished with their cancer treatments, PT can be instrumental in assisting in the return to their prior level of function. The patient will regain lost range of motion, strength and endurance. At this point orthotic and gait training may also be introduced if needed.

While PT can be an important part of a person's treatment for, and recovery from, cancer, support groups and wellness pro-grams are equally as important. It has been shown that patients who take part in a wellness pro-

gram experience increased motivation, decreased stress, an increased feeling of control or empowerment, as well as a decreased sense of going through this difficult time alone.'

It is important to initiate any kind of treatment as early as possible after a diagnosis of cancer in order to get the most possible benefit. While this holds especially true for medicinal treatment, an early start to complementary treatments can help to minimize secondary symptoms and, more importantly maintain a patient's functional independence and quality of life.