

FitFacts®



Exercise for Breast Cancer Survivors

AFTER SURVIVING YOUR BREAST CANCER DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT, YOU MAY WONDER, IF YOU'LL EVER REGAIN YOUR STRENGTH. WHETHER OR NOT YOU WERE ABLE TO STAY ACTIVE DURING YOUR TREATMENT, REGULAR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY WILL BE AN IMPORTANT PART OF YOUR RECOVERY PLAN. MANY BREAST CANCER SURVIVORS SAY THAT GETTING AND STAYING ACTIVE HAS PLAYED A BIG ROLE IN GETTING THEIR LIVES BACK.

MOVING MATTERS

Regular exercise builds strength and endurance, giving you more energy to do the things you enjoy. It helps restore physical function lost to inactivity or medical treatments. And research demonstrates a strong link between an active lifestyle and a brighter future for breast cancer survivors:

- Compared to sedentary women, regular exercisers, who have been diagnosed with breast cancer, have a much lower risk of breast cancer recurrence, breast cancer death, and all causes of death.
- About 50-96% of female breast cancer patients experience weight gain, with an increase in fat weight and a loss of muscle weight. Regular aerobic exercise and resistance training can help mitigate and reverse these effects.
- Breast cancer surgery often reduces shoulder mobility. Flexibility exercise helps restore a normal range of motion.
- Increased physical activity after cancer treatment has been consistently linked to better physical function, reduced fatigue, and bodily pain.
- Physically active survivors typically score higher on measures of emotional well-being and overall quality of life compared to their less active or sedentary peers.

Despite these well-established benefits of exercise after breast cancer, only half of all survivors exercise regularly, often due to concerns about [lymphedema](#) and a lack of information about safe and effective exercise.

GOOD NEWS ABOUT LYMPHEDEMA

Recent studies have shown that neither aerobic exercise nor resistance training is linked to developing or worsening of breast cancer-related lymphedema. Better yet, one study found that women who followed a slow, progressive strength-training program lowered their risk of developing lymphedema by 35 percent; women who had at least five lymph nodes removed and started lifting weights reduced their risk by 70 percent.

Not only is strength-training ideal for preventing lymphedema, it also helps build strong bones, good posture, and overall strength.

GETTING STARTED

Being active is clearly one of the best things you can do for yourself after breast cancer. To get moving in the right direction, follow these guidelines:

1. *Talk with your doctor first.* Ask for specific recommendations, limitations, and precautions. Your doctor may be able to point you to a cancer rehabilitation program or a community fitness program designed specifically for breast cancer survivors.

2. *Get professional instruction.* Consider working with a licensed physical therapist or a certified fitness professional who is experienced in working with breast cancer survivors. The allied health and fitness professionals will design a well-balanced exercise program tailored to your needs, goals, and interests.
3. *Start slowly.* Even if you were very active before your diagnosis, you may need to start very slowly. Be patient, and follow your doctor's instructions in gradually increasing the duration, frequency, and intensity of your exercise. Allow adequate rest in between exercise sessions. If you experience side-effects from exercise, seek immediate medical advice before resuming activity.
4. *Gather support.* Get plugged into a community of women who understand what you're going through. Sharing similar goals, challenges and getting support increase your odds of developing an active lifestyle. Ask your health care team to recommend local groups, networks, and support services. With so many breast cancer survivorship resources available, you'll find the right program for you.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Susan G. Komen for the Cure](#)

[American Cancer Society](#)

[National Center on Physical Activity, and Disability \(NCPAD\)](#)