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A New Lease On Life

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A New Lease

Patti Koonz works out under the close watch of Christine F. Hayes, PT, PC, at Hayes' clinic in Paoli, PA. Diagnosed in 1998 with a rare form of breast cancer, Koonz said physical therapy has greatly improved the quality of her life. (PHOTO BY KYLE MONTGOMERY)

on life

PTs can play a unique role in boosting health and lifting spirits of patients with cancer

"The results show you have cancer."

This statement from a doctor following a routine checkup or from a specialist following repeated tests can induce a sense of finality, despair and an uphill battle to fight this dreaded disease.

But both research studies and practical outcomes are showing that patients with cancer who undertake some form of physical therapy both during and after treatments can make gains not only on their physical health, but also on their mental well-being.

Fighting the Fatigue

Aside from overcoming the shock of their initial diagnosis and enduring rounds of chemotherapy, many patients with cancer find themselves stressed over the decrease in their overall quality of life.

"No one who has not had cancer or the treatments can comprehend the fatigue," said Patti Koonz, a West Chester, PA, resident who was diagnosed in August 1998 with invasive lobular carcinoma, a rare form of breast cancer. "Think of the worst flu you have ever had, and multiply that by 10. That's how bad it was."

Koonz had benign cysts removed in 1992 from her left breast. In April 1998, she underwent an ultrasound, which revealed nothing but more benign calcifications. Four months later while taking a shower, Koonz said she felt a mass on her left side. "I saw my gynecologist, who sent me to have an MRI and another ultrasound, but they couldn't find anything. But I knew something was there. This [form of] cancer spreads like a spider web, not as a lump. I was sent to an oncological surgeon who specialized in breast cancer, and within minutes he found a swollen lymph node that the other doctors did not find. It hadn't been picked up by the mammograms I had every six months because of my family his-

tory of breast cancer."

Following the diagnosis, Koonz had a lumpectomy, quickly followed by a modified radical mastectomy. To allow the surgery time to heal, Koonz began treatments that October.

"I had four rounds of chemotherapy—the really nasty stuff," she said. "You can lose your hair, and it can result in collapsed veins. It really does affect the whole body. My headaches were so bad I could not read or watch TV, so I laid in bed for hours, but then had trouble sleeping."

Koonz stuck with the chemotherapy treatment, and her blood count continued to be low, which only added to her fatigue. She also had neuropathy, resulting in a throbbing pain in her legs that did not go away. "I was feeling worse and worse—I was sick and tired of being tired." After doing some research on the Web and seeing a doctor in Manhattan—during which Koonz said she could hardly walk—she tried acupuncture in July 1999. In two weeks, she felt better, enough to go to Paris with her husband for 10 days.

Although none of her doctors had mentioned physical therapy as an option, Koonz heard about Chris Hayes, PT, through a friend who also had cancer. "I thought only people with broken bones went to PT!" she said. She began going, and said it helped "enormously. I went in the mornings, and felt energized for the rest of the day. [My] treatments involve a long reconstructive process, so now, every time I go for surgery I ask the surgeon for a script for physical therapy."

Why PT Helps

There are many physiological changes that patients with cancer experience as they progress through oncology treatment, said Hayes, owner of her own clinic in Paoli, PA, that specializes in rehabilitation from cancer, orthopedics and personal training.

Seventy percent of patients with cancer whom Hayes sees report fatigue and overall deconditioning while undergoing treatments. "Without any interventions, some patients continue with marked deconditioning for more than two years after their treatments are over," Hayes said. "This can significantly reduce their quality of life."

Other changes that can occur include muscle atrophy and decreased bone density from prolonged periods of immobility or decreased activity, Hayes said. Potential side-effects of some cancer medications can not only add to the changes, but have also been linked with other complications such as swelling, cardiomyopathy and neuropathies.

"Exercise and PT can help reduce stress, anxiety depression and feelings related to changing body image. Practices that are geared toward a one-on-one approach are ideal for this [patient population]," Hayes said.

Hayes said she will take patients through a detailed evaluation and history, to assess their specific orthopedic and oncological needs. "We want to see what's happening from a muscle and bone standpoint, and focus on areas that are specifically affected, such as the upper extremities following breast cancer surgery. PTs can also prescribe trunk strengthening exercises for reconstructive breast patients who frequently develop abdominal weakness and postural abnormalities."

Hayes also uses stretching exercises, lifting with light weights, cross-training patterns on the treadmill and stationary biking. "Aerobic exercises can increase energy levels and boost the immune system, >

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—Chris Hayes, PT

cover story

which is important for patients at any stage," she said. Cool-down exercises are also a must to regulate cardiopulmonary systems.

Therapists treating patients with cancer should also constantly monitor blood pressure, heart rate and use a perceived exertion scale, teaching patients how to use it when doing exercises at home, Hayes said. Always look for contraindications, as patients' abilities and energy can fluctuate between visits (e.g., with lower blood counts). Ask patients what types of medications they are using, including chemotherapy, as they can impact bone density, balance and cardiovascular system, she said. "It is always essential that therapists have an awareness of the precautions necessary prior to exercising patients," she said.

Koonz even credits Hayes for detecting that her blood pressure was decreasing with increase in exercise, a potential red flag for certain types of medications. "It was affecting my heart, and it could have caused congestive heart failure. She's the one who picked it up."

Hayes said she recommends checking with the APTA's Section on Oncology, which distributes resources on drugs and their contraindications to treatments. Continuing education through the section can be beneficial in the safe and effective treatment of this population. Communication with patients' oncologists is also paramount.

No Place Like Home

PTs and PTAs who work with patients with cancer can also encourage them to follow through on their therapy sessions at home, even in smaller doses.



"I always encourage a home exercise program at lower levels of exercise initially. This can be performed twice a day for as little as five minutes to start. Patients can generally feel a difference within the first week. Instruction is given to progress exercises with light weights, therabands, and home walking or biking as able," Hayes said. Patients are also encouraged to pace their daily activities and rest as needed, with a short nap during the day, she said.

Hayes also educates patients in the prevention and treatment of lymphedema, a potential consequence to cancer surgeries and treatments. Hayes employs two therapists who specialize in treating lymphedema with manual lymph drainage (MLD), massage of the affected limb and use of compression garments. Most patients with lymphedema are encouraged to learn self care measures to alleviate this condition as well, Hayes said, and this is where a discussion of a possible exercise program fits in.

"Patients generally feel great with the lymphedema treatment, as it relieves pressure, pain and can improve the cosmetic appearance of the affected extremity," she said. "We also try to get family members or caregivers involved by teaching them the massage techniques to do at home."

Physical therapists treating patients with cancer should emphasize the importance of early intervention, not only in the treatment of lymphedema but also to combat fatigue and deconditioning, Hayes said. If lymphedema referral to physical therapy is delayed, it becomes more difficult to reduce the condition. One patient, Hayes recalled, was referred to therapy with advanced lymphedema. "The condition had gotten so bad that what we did for her made her feel better, but did little to reduce the overall swelling." The key, Hayes said, is an early referral.

Getting the Word Out on PT

While PTs can encourage the patients with cancer they see to take part in their own rehab, many patients simply don't know that physical therapy can address a lot of the pain, discomfort and fatigue they cope with.

To solve this problem, Hayes and her clinic participate as an off-site satellite program for The Wellness Community of Philadelphia. According to their mission statement, the WCP aims to help people with cancer and their loved ones enhance health and well-being by providing a professional program of emotional support, education and hope.

"Patients often say, what can I do to help myself?" Hayes said. "When they see us, we're the ones who ask about their quality of life and day-to-day activities. Their doctors are often focused on the medical aspects of treatment, so PTs can help address many of the other important issues."

Through the WCP, Hayes's clinic provides evening programs for patients with cancer on topics such as nutrition and diet, using herbal supplements, alternative healing, exercise following surgery, meditation and relaxation, and fun activities such as music, cooking and knitting. They also promote WCP's various support groups for patients and their families. Hayes also speaks with patients in support groups, to tell them the PT is a viable option to help them boost their overall wellness.

More importantly, Hayes uses her own time and expertise to talk to doctors and surgeons in the area about better informing patients of the positive effects PT can have.

"Educating patients, nurses and physicians is paramount to spreading the word," Hayes said. "Physicians are now starting to make referrals to physical therapy because they are seeing such good results. Their patients report that they feel more energetic, whether they are in an early stage of cancer, advanced or remission."

Koonz is a living testimonial to this. "I would recommend [Hayes] or PT in general to anyone," she said. "It has greatly improved my quality of life. Most oncologists want [their patients'] cancer in remission as quickly as possible, and sometimes, they don't care how this is done. They might not think to say, why don't you try exercise? Exercise releases endorphins to counteract pain."

She has already trumpeted the healing effects of PT to other friends who have breast cancer. "Patients should always question their doctors on how they can improve their quality of life," Koonz said. "The information is out there." ■

• For more information on The Wellness Community of Philadelphia and its offsite programs, call (215) 879-7733 or visit www.twcp.org.

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