



## Do I Need Cancer Rehabilitation?

by David S. Zucker, MD, PhD

**W**hen you have cancer, it's easy to forget that your body has trillions of healthy cells. This is true regardless of whether the cancer is stage 0 or stage IV. These healthy cells support you through the rigors of treatment. Too often, however, the support that your healthy cells offer is forgotten in the flurry of activities surrounding treatment and the dramatic changes in your everyday life. These changes are not only physical but also

this challenging reality takes courage, insight, and support.

So how can cancer rehabilitation help the whole person – molecules to spirit – cope with cancer and treatment?

Cancer rehabilitation is about function – the ability to participate in everyday life. The role of the cancer rehabilitation physician, or *onco-physiatrist*, is to sort through the cancer- and treatment-related symptoms that interfere with your everyday functioning and, with the help of

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emotional and spiritual. After all, cancer affects the whole person from molecule to spirit.

At the molecular level, your healthy tissues are subjected to profound physiologic demands, demands that take an enormous amount of their energy. Cancer treatments are taxing on the body. Fatigue, pain, difficulty sleeping, numbness and tingling in the limbs, poor balance, and foggy thinking can all impair daily functioning.

At the spiritual level, receiving a cancer diagnosis is often the first time that a person is forced to face his or her own mortality. While frightening, this awareness can open the door to profound and positive changes in how you view yourself, the world, and even cancer. Facing

an interdisciplinary team, create an individualized rehabilitation program that will optimize your well-being and ability to participate in normal activities. A rehabilitation team may include physical therapists, occupational therapists, exercise physiologists, counselors, psycho-oncologists, and speech language pathologists.

Exercise is a key component of cancer rehabilitation. Athletes need to prepare for any physically demanding event. Why then, should it be different for cancer survivors? While a far cry from an athletic event, the same training principles that apply to athletes also apply to cancer survivors. These principles include attaining the correct exercise frequency, intensity, duration,

and type, tuned individually to your needs as a cancer survivor.

Even during treatment, exercise can improve strength and fitness. For women with breast cancer going through treatment, exercise has been shown to reduce fatigue. After treatment, the benefits continue to build, including further reductions in fatigue, improved mood, and better ability to return to your everyday activities.

Cancer rehabilitation fully involves the survivor in its implementation. You become the steward of your healthy cells. This imparts a sense of control in what otherwise may seem like an uncontrollable situation. The actual experience of gaining some control over side effects



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such as fatigue and pain provides an undeniable sense of accomplishment that can energize and empower you to more confidently face the challenging spiritual aspects of cancer.

During cancer rehabilitation, you become a fully active participant in your care, the true center of your care team. You and your rehabilitation team attend to your trillions of healthy cells while your medical team attends to curing or putting cancer into remission. This is whole-person care.

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Cancer rehabilitation resources vary widely across the country. Consult with your health-care team to find out what rehabilitation resources are available in your community.