

Creating Safer Wellness Practices after a Cancer Diagnosis



**Guidelines on Three Common
Side Effects of Cancer Treatment**

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Wellness activities such as yoga, exercise, massage and other complementary modalities can bring both physical and mental benefits to people diagnosed with cancer.

On top of that, often they just feel good, and feeling good is so important, especially during and after going through cancer treatment.

However, after a cancer diagnosis, there may be many new considerations with regard to exercise and other wellness modalities.

While every person will encounter unique situations during and after cancer treatment, there are some common areas of concern. People diagnosed with cancer, their caregivers and medical and wellness team members should all be familiar with risk reduction practices. The following provides an introduction to three potential side effects of cancer treatment and some recommendations on creating safer wellness practices related to these conditions.

LYMPHEDEMA RISK

After cancer treatments, some individuals are at risk for lymphedema, a serious condition in which excess fluid (lymph) collects in tissues and causes swelling, most commonly in arms and legs. Many cancer treatments affect lymph nodes, so individuals need to be aware of lymphedema risk and precautions if lymph nodes have been affected by radiation, surgery or other causes.

Doctors report that there is no way of predicting who will get lymphedema, although research shows that the risk for lymphedema can increase with the number of lymph nodes affected and the number of radiation treatments received. However, some risk can potentially exist if even one lymph node has been injured. The risk for lymphedema is typically considered a lifetime risk, as the damage to the lymph nodes is considered permanent.

The National Lymphedema Network (NLN) is a leading advocacy group that provides guidelines for reducing lymphedema risk, and the following recommendations include some of those that the NLN and other experts suggest to minimize the risk of lymphedema:

Educate Yourself

According to many lymphedema experts, the biggest risk factor for lymphedema is a knowledge deficit. It is important that individuals with a cancer diagnosis and professionals working in health and wellness are

both aware of the risk factors for lymphedema and how to minimize them. Lymphedema can't be "prevented" but the risk can be minimized by following safety guidelines, such as those given by the NLN. There are many valuable resources, such as books and NLN position papers on exercise that individuals can read to further educate themselves.

Work with Your Medical Team to Create a Plan

Individuals undergoing cancer treatment (and any wellness professionals that they are working with) should understand and follow the recommended the medical team's risk-reduction guidelines for lymphedema during and after treatment. The ideal time to discuss these recommendations is before the surgery or treatments. If the physician doesn't bring up these topics, the patient should ask about them.

The patient, physician and any wellness professionals that the patient will be working with should ideally share key information in order to create a plan that reduces risks and maximizes benefits of any wellness activities.

Know Your Limb

Experts suggest that individuals who are going to start cancer treatment should start by getting pre-treatment baseline measurements of areas that may be affected by treatment, such as arms. If it is possible to do this BEFORE the surgery or other treatments, that is ideal. This way, any changes can be quantified later and addressed immediately. Time is of

the essence in managing lymphedema, and the earlier that it is diagnosed and treated, the better.

Exercise Caution

Exercise can have many benefits, both for health maintenance, and after a cancer diagnosis to improve quality of life and to reduce the risk of recurrence. However, once medical clearance has been given to exercise after a cancer diagnosis, exercising *safely* is key. Check with your medical team for any guidelines they have.

If lymph nodes have been injured by treatments, one important aspect of safe exercise and movement is to **START LOW** and **GO SLOW**. Studies on lymphedema and exercise show that this may include starting at the lowest possible intensity or weight, staying there for a given amount of time (, using correct form, wearing a sleeve if indicated, observing the results on the affected limb, and moving up in weight, intensity or repetitions in the smallest possible increments.

Exercise Regularly

Kathryn Schmitz, PhD, MPH, who led a major randomized controlled trial on Physical Activity and Lymphedema published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2009, clarified many misconceptions about this study in “Weight Lifting and Lymphedema: Clearing up Misconceptions.”

Schmitz stated that among the study participants who lifted weights, irregular attendance and breaks in attendance were hypothesized to be correlated with upper body lymphedema exacerbations and other injuries. The researchers suggested that if it was not possible to do weightlifting regularly twice a week, it was better to not do it at all. Those who do take a break and come back were advised to start back at 1-3 pound weights.

Observe Closely

Individuals at risk for lymphedema should observe what happens during and after exercise, particularly in areas at risk for lymphedema: is there any swelling, numbness, tightness, redness, pain, etc.? If any of the changes listed above or other changes occur, the appropriate health care professional should be consulted as soon as possible.

Work with Knowledgeable Team Members

If symptoms do occur, the NLN recommends getting a referral to see a certified lymphedema therapist who have met the requirements as outlined by the Lymphology Association of North America (LANA®), or a physician, advanced practice nurse, or physician's assistant knowledgeable about lymphedema and lymphedema management.

Any fitness or yoga professionals working with individuals who have had a cancer diagnosis or cancer treatment should be educated in the appropriate modifications needed to minimize lymphedema risk. This also applies to massage therapists and estheticians who are working with

people who have been diagnosed with cancer as well, as many standard practices in these fields will need to be modified in order to safely work with people diagnosed with and treated for cancer.

Wear Compression Garments Properly

Compression garments provide a medically correct compression gradient (a gradual decrease in pressure over the length of the limb) and short stretch bandages used to wrap areas affected by lymphedema should not be confused with items such as Ace bandages.

Persons with lymphedema should wear the appropriate compression garments as prescribed by his or her medical team, and wear them as guided during exercise. Always work with a qualified lymphedema specialist and don't try to create your own wrap without initial supervision, as it could make things worse.

Most lymphedema experts do not recommend wearing compression garments "preventatively" but each person who has a lymphedema risk should check with his or her medical team for guidelines that apply to them specifically.

Enjoy Life

Lymphedema risk should be respected, but not feared. Many people with significant lymphedema risk or a lymphedema diagnosis are enjoying themselves, exercising and living life to the fullest. Individuals with a

cancer diagnosis have climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro and competed in Dragon Boat races, but no matter what exciting adventures life brings, following the lymphedema risk reduction and safety guidelines will help to promote health and safety.

More Information

These are just a few of the recommendations related to lymphedema, there are many more. See your healthcare professionals for specific guidance or contact the National Lymph Network for assistance in finding a lymphedema therapist.

For more general education on modifying wellness activities after cancer and cancer treatment, see <http://integrativecancer.org/the-cancer-journey/lymphedema/>.

BONE HEALTH CONCERNS

Bone health can be a big concern after cancer and cancer treatment. Certain types of cancer, many cancer-related medications and other factors can lead to bone loss, and bone loss increases fracture risk, so it is important to be aware of bone health issues.

Studies show that a high percentage of bone loss conditions go undiagnosed, so whether or not an “official” diagnosis has been given, many people treated for cancer will be at a higher risk for bone loss and it is important to be aware of that increased risk.

The following suggestions for addressing bone health after cancer and its treatment may help to keep bones healthier and minimize the risk of bone injury:

Get a Baseline Assessment

Individuals diagnosed with cancer should discuss bone health status with the treating physician before starting treatment if possible and see if it is recommended to get a baseline DEXA scan or other bone health tests. The DEXA scan can determine bone density and can identify osteoporosis or osteopenia, which are two forms of bone loss. A baseline test can provide comparison results to see if bones are staying strong through treatments or if protective measures should be taken once treatments have started and afterward.

Understand the Potential Impact of Treatments on Bones

Certain treatments, medications and conditions associated with cancer can lead to bone weakening and bone loss. Before starting treatments, individuals should discuss the potential bone health impact of the treatments with the medical team and find out the implications for bone health. Certain medical centers and cancer treatment programs now offer bone health specialists who work with the rest of the cancer treatment team. By being proactive, some of the risks associated with bone health can be addressed and minimized.

Understand Bone Health Treatment Options

In some cases of bone loss, bone building medications may be suggested. However, many of these medications do have side effects. If bone building medications are prescribed, individuals should also be aware of ALL the potential side effects these medications that may be prescribed and make an educated decision as to what to use and all of the options that are available.

Exercise but Adapt Safely

Exercise has all kinds of benefits, so you don't want to miss out on these. Certain types of yoga and some forms of exercise have been shown in studies to improve bone health and decrease fracture risk through a combination of factors. However, whenever exercising, it is important to be aware of specific contradictions or precautions with physical

movements for people with certain bone loss conditions. The National Osteoporosis Foundation (NOF) is one organization that provides such guidelines.

Studies have specifically examined the safety of various types of yoga poses for people with osteoporosis, with results that have major implications for the type of yoga poses that are chosen.

For example, studies show that flexion or “rounding” of the spine is associated with a high risk of compression fractures in individuals with osteoporosis. Therefore, it is important to be aware of this fact when undertaking a fitness program.

Awareness of flexion risk is important for both people diagnosed with cancer as well as for yoga teachers and other wellness professionals dealing with people with or at risk for bone loss. In these circumstances, it is important to know how and when appropriate modifications to poses or movements are indicated. Properly trained yoga teachers and fitness professionals who are educated on the side effects of cancer and bone health can assist in guiding these practices.

For more information on Bone Health after cancer, see:

<http://integrativecancer.org/the-cancer-journey/bone-loss/>.

One of the potential and common side effects of cancer treatment is Chemotherapy-Induced Peripheral Neuropathy (CIPN). Neuropathy means “disease of nerve” and the effects of CIPN can occur during--and sometimes indefinitely after-- chemotherapy treatment, sometimes cutting short needed treatments due to the severity symptoms. The medical team needs to know if signs of CIPN occur during treatment.

Studies show that up to 70% of patients treated with certain chemotherapy agents may experience symptoms of CIPN. According to a University of Rochester study published in *Supportive Care in Cancer* in 2013, patients treated with certain chemotherapy agents, including taxanes, vinca alkaloids, or platinum agents are at high risk of experiencing the effects of CIPN. These drugs are used to treat many types of cancer, including breast, lung, lymphoma and leukemia.

CIPN Symptoms

The two main symptoms of CIPN are impaired sensory and motor functioning. Symptoms of CIPN can include:

- Pain, either intermittent or constant, shooting or stabbing
- Burning sensation
- Tingling or a “pins and needles” sensation
- Numbness
- Problems with balance

- Reduced OR increased sense of heat, cold, pressure or touch
- Trouble using fingers, dropping things
- Tripping or stumbling while walking
- Reduced reflexes
- Shrinking muscles and/or muscle weakness

Other conditions, such as diabetes or multiple myeloma, or other treatments besides chemotherapy, such as radiation, can cause also cause peripheral neuropathy. Symptoms can be caused by a variety of conditions, so it is important to see one's physician if any of these symptoms occur and to get an accurate diagnosis and treatment plan.

CIPN and Balance

Being over age 40, as well as certain medical conditions like CIPN, can negatively affect the body's balance systems. CIPN can especially affect walking and balance, because the condition alters sensory input in the lower extremities. As we lose confidence in our balance, we often become more sedentary, which causes a snow ball effect, reducing our ability to process sensory input and increasing the likelihood of falls.

When it comes to exercise, following are suggestions to improve balance and decrease fall and fracture risk:

See Your Doctor to Talk about CIPN

If you have any symptoms of CIPN, see your healthcare provide to get diagnosed. Investigate treatment options for CIPN if it occurs. Check with the doctor about any medications or medical conditions that could

increase fall risk and follow recommendations. Certain medical practices and medical centers have fall prevention programs.

Move Your Body and Practice Balance

If you have CIPN, stay as active as medically indicated, and when appropriate, practice activities that can help with balance, strength, coordination and flexibility, such as yoga, Tai Chi and walking.

Practicing balance and proprioception can improve skills. These should be practiced in a safe position and place to minimize the risk of falls. Be very mindful when walking, moving or doing yoga, especially when transitioning in or out of positions.

Communicate with the Wellness Team

Anyone dealing with CIPN should be communicating with their wellness team members to get ideas on how to adapt physical practices appropriately. Yoga, fitness and other wellness professionals should be educated about CIPN and learn the how to modify the activities practiced.

Make Your Environment Safer

- Try not to carry things when you are walking, especially on ice or other slippery surfaces. Keep your hands free, your knees soft and be mindful of core stability.

- Wear good footwear and avoid walking in stocking feet or floppy slippers.

- Clear pathways, removing hazards and loose rugs and other items around the house or in fitness and yoga classes.
- A wall, handle or other support can be used as needed when balancing. Be aware that a reliance on these measures may indicate a need for more intervention with balance issues and additional help should be sought if needed.

More Information

Practice good health measures when it comes to your bones – reducing fall risk is only one part of preventing fractures.

For more information on wellness and Neuropathy & Balance Concerns, see: <http://integrativecancer.org/the-cancer-journey/neuropathy-pain/>.

WORKING TOGETHER WITH YOUR TEAM

Each of the conditions and concerns listed in this report should be discussed with the medical team and any guidance from the team should be taken into account before undertaking any wellness activities.

Wellness professionals such as yoga and fitness instructors and massage therapists who are working with people diagnosed with cancer should be educated on appropriate precautions as well, understanding the appropriate modifications to make for various conditions and side effects.

Communication and education are two keys to safer wellness practices after a cancer diagnosis. By working together, wellness therapies after cancer treatments can be more enjoyable, safer and more effective.

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