

Exercise: The new weapon in the war against breast cancer

Physically active women have up to a 40 percent reduced risk of developing breast cancer. Women who exercise after breast cancer cut their long-term risk of dying from it by one quarter to one half.

by Diana Settles

Exercise not only keeps you slim and trim, scientists have found physical activity to be the new weapon in the war against breast cancer.

Even moderate physical activity such as walking 30 minutes a day appears to substantially improve women's chances of surviving breast cancer.

The National Cancer Institute reports that physically active women have up to a 40 percent reduced risk of developing breast cancer. Although a lifetime of regular, vigorous activity is thought to be of greatest benefit, women who occasionally engage in physical activity also experience a reduced risk compared to inactive women.

Preventing Breast Cancer with Exercise

A number of studies also suggest that the effect of physical activity in preventing breast cancer

may have the greatest benefit seen in women in the normal weight range. A recent major report from the Women's Health Initiative found that among postmenopausal women, walking 30 minutes per day was associated with a 20 percent reduction in breast cancer risk. According to National Cancer Institute, the health benefits of physical activity were greatest among women who were of normal weight; they experienced at 37 percent decrease in risk.

Surviving Breast Cancer

"We know that physical activity has been shown to improve the quality of life for women with breast cancer," said Dr. Michelle Holmes of Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. Her study, released in April 2004 at the American Association for Cancer Research Meeting, found that women who exercised after having breast cancer reduced their chance of dying from the disease by amounts ranging from one-quarter to more than one-half, depending on how active they were.

Holmes' results were based on the Nurses Health Study, which has followed the health of over 122,000 female nurses since 1976. The researchers looked at physical activity in 2,167 women who were diagnosed with breast cancer after the study began.

How can physical activity reduce breast cancer risk?

Researchers have proposed many theories that may explain the relationship between physical activity and breast cancer development. Physical

activity causes changes in hormone metabolism, body mass and immune function, which may prevent tumor development. Exercise may reduce breast cancer by burning up stored fat that produces estrogen, which in turn can fuel breast cancer growth.

How much exercise is recommended to increase survival of breast cancer?

Women in the study women who exercised significantly decreased their risk of dying compared with breast cancer survivors who were sedentary:

- 1-3 hours a week lowered risk of dying by 19 percent

- 3-5 hours a week of moderate physical activity cut the risk by 54 percent

- 5-8 hours a week reduced it 51 percent

Vanderbilt researcher Charles Matthews said those who stayed active through exercise, housework and walking and cycling for errands had about one-third lower risk of breast cancer.

"We have known for a long time that exercising regularly is one of the best ways to maintain long-term health," says Dr. Harry Raftopoulos, MD, the leading oncologist and assistant professor of medicine at New York Presbyterian Hospital. "That's true for everyone, not just cancer patients and cancer survivors. The evidence that exercise is indeed a cancer-fighting tool should come as more motivation for people to get on their feet!

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