



22 Ways Breast Cancer Survivors Can Get Moving

Simple suggestions for reaping the many health benefits of physical activity after treatment.

By Anne Fitz

For a breast cancer survivor, there are plenty of days when simply getting out of bed can feel like running a marathon. And survivors would know, since they've already been through an ordeal that makes a marathon look like a walk in the park. "My clients often say that they don't know how they can exercise now, with the pain, worry, fear, and fatigue that often accompanies diagnosis and treatment," says Linda Gottlieb, American College of Sports Medicine/American Cancer Society certified Cancer Exercise Trainer (CET) and founder of MovingThroughCancer.com.

Regular physical activity has far too many health benefits to ignore, however, so you have a new challenge: to slowly get moving, a little bit every day.

"Some days you're not going to be up to exercising," acknowledges Colleen Doyle, MS, RD, the American Cancer Society's managing director of nutrition and physical activity. "And that's okay. But being active as a breast cancer survivor will give you a sense of control after feeling out of control for so long." Her suggestion for being consistent? Aim for more activity on your good days and less on your bad ones—and don't beat yourself up about the bad ones. Read on for easy, low-stress ways to get moving.

BACK TO BASICS

If you're starting immediately after your treatment, proceed slowly, advises Gottlieb. That goes for those who were avid gym-goers pre-diagnosis and double if you were sedentary. "Start out conservatively and increase the intensity and duration as your stability, strength, and confidence pick up," she says. "And they will!"

1. Commit. The first step really is deciding that regular physical activity is important, Doyle says. But take it one day at a time. "Set a goal to stay active for today," she says, and then make yourself accountable by writing down the goal and sticking it on your fridge or saying it out loud to a friend or partner.

2. Ask for help. Once your doctor green-lights your physical activity, consider working with a physical therapist, a cancer exercise trainer, (CET), a [Livestrong at the YMCA](#) program, or a certified personal trainer. He or she will tailor a program to fit your needs and refine it as your fitness improves, says Doyle.

3. March in tune. For starters, try walking in place at home to a favorite soundtrack or during the commercials while you're watching the *Today* show, suggests Gottlieb. You literally won't have to leave your comfort zone.

4, 5, 6. S-t-r-e-t-c-h. If even brushing your hair is a strain post-treatment, try these stretches from Blake Swan, director of sports performance at University Orthopaedic Associates in Somerset, NJ. They'll help you regain your normal range of motion in your shoulders and chest. They're ideal for those "bad days" when you don't feel up to anything strenuous.

Corner Stretch: Facing a corner, stand tall with feet together one foot-length away. Place a palm and forearm against each wall at a 90-degree angle at shoulder height. Gently lean your chest toward the wall.

Itsy Bitsy Spider: Facing a wall, stand tall with feet together one foot-length away. Place fingertips against the wall at shoulder height. Gently crawl your fingers up the wall until you feel the stretch in your shoulders.

Upper Body Butterflies: Lie on the floor with your hands clasped behind your head and your elbows in front of your face. Gently "fly" both elbows out aiming to touch them to the ground.

READY, SET, GO!

Now that you're feeling a little more comfortable, kick it up a notch. Try adding weights, joining a gym, and enlisting others to join you.

7. Set the right pace. If you're feeling unsteady, set the treadmill to a slow speed and hold on to the handrail, says Beth Jordan, ACE Certified Personal Trainer and spokeswoman and owner of Beth's Bootcamp in Jacksonville Beach, Florida.

8. Buddy up. Join a breast cancer support group (check [cancer.org](#)) to find a workout pal. "You're more likely to take that walk or attend that class if you're meeting a buddy," Doyle says. In addition, participating with a fellow breast cancer survivor may help you feel less self-conscious about any physical changes or limitations that you have.

9. Think small. To rebuild muscle mass, skip the fancy weight machines in favor of 1- or 2-pound hand weights. "You focus on your form and control when you lift light weights (think bicep curls or tricep kickbacks), so you're less likely to get injured," says Jordan.

10. Bear some weight. Exercises that use your own body weight for resistance may help you regain strength and build bone mass. “Planks, lunges, and squats—exercises that push, pull, and manage body weight—are all excellent,” Gottlieb says.

11. Feel the joy. Never underestimate the power of play. “Being active with your kids or grandkids sends a positive message to your entire family,” says Doyle. “It tells them that you’re committed to being as healthy as possible and to sticking around for a long time to come.”

12. Crank up the volume. While a full Zumba class may be too fast-paced, dancing at home—alone or with a partner—in a setting where you control the tempo may prompt your brain to release feel-good endorphins, says Jordan. And simply hearing a favorite tune can put you in a good mood. Win-win.

13. Say “Namaste.” Yoga is heavily touted for breast cancer survivors. “Any time you can be present with your resilient body, relax into postures designed to elongate muscles and improve posture and concentrate on your breathing, you are moving toward healing,” says Gottlieb, who recommends that beginners start with a slower version, such as Hatha.

14. Get into gear. A recumbent stationary bike with a backrest allows you to sit and pedal your way to a complete aerobic workout. Being seated with back support is not only easier on the joints, but may also be helpful if you have “chemo brain” or are otherwise unsteady, says Jordan.

15. Make a splash. “While it can no doubt be hard to get back into a bathing suit, once you’re in the water and feeling weightless, the issues of land seemingly melt away,” Gottlieb says. Begin by water-walking in the shallow end and progress to a more strenuous workout of water aerobics or swimming.

16. Go to the mat. Pilates, a series of movements that requires concentration and proper breathing, is an excellent option for breast-cancer survivors, says Francesca Meccariello, certified personal trainer and Pilates instructor in Melbourne, FL. “It restores strength to your core and helps open your chest, improve balance, and promote mindfulness before, during, and after recovery,” she says. Meccariello recommends starting with a simple mat class before working up to a full session on the reformer.

17. Think defensively. With its slow yet precise movements, tai chi, the martial arts practice, may help you create mindfulness and positive energy all while promoting blood flow and improving your range of motion, says Meccariello.

KEEP IT MOVING

As your strength and energy return, keep experimenting to find the activity that you enjoy, suggests Doyle. “If you’re not a runner, don’t force it,” she says. Try tennis, a spinning class, hiking, ballroom dancing. You’re sure to find something you like by checking [Livestrong at the YMCA](#) (which partners with 534 Y’s nationwide).

18. Embrace technology. Track your progress on a FitBit, Apple watch, or other wearable device for motivation, Doyle suggests. “Set your device to beep when you’ve been sitting for too long, as a reminder that it’s time to move.”

19. Return to oldies but goodies. Revisit the activities you loved before your diagnosis. “When I got on a bicycle for the first time since starting treatment, I was instantly reminded of how amazing cycling feels,” says Sandy Hanshaw, 49, a breast cancer survivor of three years. “The wind on my face, the sun on my back, and the ability of my legs to handle the curves of the road all help me focus on things other than being a cancer survivor.”

20. Goof off. “Don’t take your workout too seriously; it’s okay if you’re not good at it,” says Laura Rubin, a breast cancer survivor of 11 years who’s tried surfing, paddle boarding, Beyoncé dance classes, and more. “Just give it a go, find what brings you joy, and know that you’re treating yourself to a great experience that’s good for you on multiple levels.”

21. Modify as needed. “You may have times where you are low-energy and walk instead of run, try gentle yoga instead of boot camp, and exercise twice a week instead of four, but keep moving,” says Eloise Caggiano, 44, a breast cancer survivor of 11 years. “Keeping the exercise habit going was really helpful for me not only to help me feel ‘normal,’ but also for my recovery and peace of mind.”

22. Feel the power. Never forget that you not only beat cancer, but you also regained control of your body and your health, says Doyle. This realization can be empowering—so revel in it.