

Exercise Can Help Women With Breast Cancer During Chemotherapy

Exercise during breast cancer treatment is associated with lower cancer recurrence and mortality.

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Women receiving breast cancer chemotherapy who exercise at their clinic on the day of their treatment may minimize chemo side effects and improve their chances of continuing to exercise on their own.

This is promising news given that routine exercise among women receiving cancer therapy has already been linked to a host of benefits, including reduced side effects, improved quality of life and even a lower risk of recurrence and death.

Presenting their findings in a poster presentation at the American Society of Clinical Oncology annual meeting in Chicago, Barbara Haas, PhD, RN, of Texas Oncology-Tyler, and colleagues conducted a randomized controlled trial to investigate whether assigning women to engage in an exercise program on the day of their breast cancer chemotherapy was associated with various positive outcomes. The program took place within the clinic where they received their treatment.

The study enrolled 274 women with Stage I to III breast cancer who were receiving neoadjuvant (presurgery) or adjuvant (postsurgery) chemotherapy. They were randomized to participate in the on-site exercise program (144 women) or not (129 women). All the women were also provided an individualized, ongoing exercise program at one of 14 community-based exercise centers known as FitSteps for Life.

The investigators wanted to know whether participating in the exercise program the day of chemotherapy was associated with improved retention in the FitSteps for Life program; improved chemotherapy side effects, including fatigue, nausea and vomiting, peripheral neuropathy and weight gain; and improved self-reported quality of life. The women were assessed for these measures on the day of each cycle of their chemotherapy and three months after the last cycle.

The two study groups were well balanced in terms of various demographics; 34% had Stage I breast cancer, 40% had Stage II and 26% had Stage III. A quarter of the women had an additional health condition, such as diabetes, coronary artery disease or high blood pressure.

By the end of the study, 93.1% of the women in the on-site exercise group were still engaged in their FitSteps for Life exercise program, compared with 87.4% of those in the control group. This difference was not statistically significant, meaning it could have been driven by chance. Nevertheless, the study authors considered the lower attrition in the on-site exercise group a promising sign.

As for the side effects, those in the intervention group had improved nausea and peripheral neuropathy after five cycles of chemotherapy. However, three months after the last cycle, there was no difference on these measures between the two study arms. The study saw no differences in quality of life between the study groups.

The researchers noted that the lack of sustained differences in side effects and quality of life could be attributable to the fact that both groups exercised more than the general population.

“Exercise is effective in moderating the side effects of chemotherapy, but will not work if an exercise program is not available, not encouraged by physicians or not maintained,” they concluded. “Exercise needs to be considered an essential component of the cancer-treatment paradigm.”

To read the conference abstract, [click here](#).