Cancer Health 25: Kathryn Schmitz, PhD, MPH, FASCM

Making exercise an integral part of cancer care and treatment

June 19, 2022 By Cancer Health Staff

The Cancer Health 25 is an annual list that honors individuals who have made a difference in the lives of people with cancer. This year's theme is quality of life. To see the full list, click here.

You can tell what matters most to Kathryn Schmitz, PhD, MPH, by her Twitter handle: @fitaftercancer. A former dancer and exercise instructor, Schmitz, 59, is a leader in the growing field of exercise oncology, the goal of which is to integrate exercise as an essential element in cancer prevention, treatment and recovery.

Now distinguished professor of public health sciences at Pennsylvania State University's College of Medicine and an American Cancer Society Clinical Research professor, Schmitz directs the ONE (Oncology, Nutrition and Exercise) Group at Penn State. She has led more than 15 exercise clinical trials and has published nearly 300 peer-reviewed scientific papers.

She has conducted seminal research on exercise and breast-cancer-related lymphedema. Her

National Cancer Institute–funded research has contributed to the Strength After Breast Cancer program, a breast cancer rehabilitation intervention covered by third-party payers that is now offered in nearly 1,000 locations across the United States and beyond. This puts Schmitz in the rare company of the few clinical researchers to have translated an efficacy trial into clinical practice.

But beyond her individual research, Schmitz has played a major role in establishing the benefits of exercise for survivors of all cancer types. In 2010, she was the lead author of the first American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) Roundtable on Exercise for Cancer Survivors, and in 2017, she was elected president of ACSM. Under her leadership, ACSM chaired a 2018 international multidisciplinary roundtable with physicians, outpatient rehabilitation specialists, researchers and exercise professionals to elevate the field of exercise oncology. The event led her to create the initiative Moving Through Cancer, which aims to ensure that all people living with and beyond cancer are assessed, advised, referred to and engaged in appropriate exercise and rehabilitation programming as a standard of care.

Schmitz has written two books, Exercise Oncology, a text for academics, and Moving Through Cancer, for patients and caregivers; a third book, Essentials of Exercise Oncology, a training text for exercise oncology professionals, is in the works. As Schmitz said in a National Cancer Institute interview, “My hope is that someday, if you ask anyone walking down the street whether exercise is valuable for cancer survivors, the response will be an emphatic yes.”

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