Cancer Rehabilitation

Julie Silver, MD, author of *Before and After Cancer Treatment*, is director of cancer rehabilitation at Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital in Boston.

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This team approach helps you recover from cancer as well as the side effects of treatment. The goal is to improve both your ability to function and your quality of life.

What is cancer rehabilitation?

Oncology patients go through therapies such as surgery, chemotherapy and radiation, which may damage healthy cells in addition to those that are malignant. This can lead to physical and mental problems, such as muscle weakness, swallowing or speech problems, lymphedema, physical disability and cognitive issues. Cancer rehabilitation helps you recover from both the cancer and the treatment.

For instance, after surgery for head and neck cancer you may have trouble turning your head, which can make it hard to drive, among other things. Rehabilitation helps you retain as much range of motion as possible.

Feeling better physically is also tied to improved psychological well-being, which can improve your ability to function and return to work or other activities. One known toxicity of cancer therapy is bankruptcy, so helping you continue to get a paycheck is important to recovery too.

What kinds of care do you provide to oncology patients?

We use many different rehabilitation interventions to help you function better and have less pain. These may include consultations with specialists, such as a rehabilitation physician (physiatrist) or a physical, occupational or speech therapist. Mental health professionals, dietitians, exercise physiologists and other health care professionals also provide valuable services.

Is cancer rehabilitation useful before treatment begins?

Yes, in many cases. “Prehabilitation” consists of interventions that help you to be as strong as possible for the upcoming treatment. It’s similar to physical therapy to strengthen your muscles before knee surgery. Getting you stronger before major cancer surgery may entail a multifactorial approach that includes, for example, exercise, nutrition and stress reduction (e.g., meditation, yoga). Studies done on patients with colon cancer have found that they do better after surgery if they prepare for the operation ahead of time. For example, they may have a shorter hospital stay

and be able to walk farther and faster.

How can I get rehabilitation?

Most cancer centers have these services available. However, you may have to ask, as rehabilitation may not be routinely offered.

Having a conversation with your oncology team is the first step. You do not need to know all the options or become an expert. Ask your doctor about whether cancer rehabilitation might help with your ability to function as optimally as possible before, during and after treatment. Ask if you might benefit from the rehabilitation program and what needs to be done for a referral.

This is an important conversation that should happen more than once over the course of treatment. One of the best things about cancer prehab and rehab is that they empower people to do something that is really positive for their health during a time when they are facing a serious health crisis.

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