

Exercise Boosts Recovery for Stem Cell Transplant Patients

Roswell Park team prioritizes early movement to get patients home faster.

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Highlights

- Roswell Park team prioritizes early movement to get patients home faster.
- Leukemia survivor credits quick recovery to regular physical activity.
- Approach helps drive 100% 6-month survival for transplant recipients.

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Physical activity, from walking to strength training, helps boost recovery for patients after their stem cell transplants, often sending them home from the hospital months early.

[Shernan Holtan, MD](#), Chief of Blood and Marrow Transplant at [Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center](#), is leading this transformation by introducing early movement into patient recovery following allogeneic transplant, a procedure where healthy stem cells from a donor are transplanted into the patient as a way to treat leukemias and other blood cancers.

“Focusing on eating protein and some resistance training to build up muscle mass means a reduction of overall inflammation and better immune function that may help control the cancer,” says Dr. Holtan. “And that’s just as important as chemotherapy.”

Stem cell transplant patients often face lengthy hospital stays, sometimes three to five months, to monitor them for complications. Dr. Holtan found these patients could largely recover at home by committing to regular physical activity, prioritizing remote follow-up appointments and optimizing donor selections. Her goal is to cut patients’ time in the hospital in half.

“Now that we have better supportive care and the transplant is overall much safer, we need to have the mindset, ‘I want patients home as much as possible,’” Dr. Holtan says. “Why? Because they’re moving their bodies more, they’re taking care of their own needs, they can control what they are eating. They’re definitely sleeping better.”

Dave Einink, a 57-year-old leukemia survivor, avoided months in the hospital after his transplant

because of a personalized recovery plan from Dr. Holtan. His cancer is now six months in remission.

“It was within a week that I went home,” Einink says. “I’ve been good ever since, and she’s just like, ‘Wow.’”

Einink slowly reincorporated regular walks and yardwork into his routine with the ultimate goal of being able to hold his granddaughters again.

“They were a driving force for getting home,” he says. “Every time I went to the hospital and they told me how long I was going to be there, I always looked at my wife and said, ‘I’m going to beat it every time.’ And I did.”

Roswell Park has achieved a 100% six-month patient survival rate for allogeneic transplants performed in 2024. Dr. Holtan and her team are now working to hit the one-year mark.

“I never thought we would see a 100% survival rate after an allogeneic transplant at six months,” Dr. Holtan says. “Our one-year survival is currently projected to be above 90%, which is mind-blowing. I’m so proud of that. It is likely to be among the best outcomes in the world.”

To learn more about the unique resources available at the only National Cancer Institute-designated comprehensive cancer center in Upstate New York, as well as the capabilities and expertise housed within the Roswell Park GMP Engineering & Cell Manufacturing Facility (GEM), visit roswellpark.org/gmp.

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