

Does exercise benefit cancer patients?

April 26 2016, by Mary A. Durlak

Good nutrition and regular exercise combined are an effective way to reduce the risk of cancer and to prevent its recurrence. "This has been proven over and over," said Carol DeNysschen, associate professor and chair of the Health, Nutrition, and Dietetics Department. "If we could only motivate people to eat better and move more, we'd have so much less chronic disease."

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Foundation awarded the 2016 Abbott Nutrition Award in Women's Health to DeNysschen in April. The annual award recognizes a dietitian who has made "significant contributions to the importance of nutrition in women's health."

DeNysschen is a registered dietitian who holds a master's degree in public health. She began working with breast [cancer](#) survivors at Roswell Park Cancer Institute while earning a doctorate in [exercise](#) science at the University at Buffalo. "I've become interested in the effects of exercise on this group of [patients](#)," said DeNysschen, "and our research interests are extending into patients with other kinds of cancers. We expect to begin a pilot study related to bladder cancer and exercise."

If it's hard for most adults to improve their diet and exercise habits, it's especially difficult for cancer patients and survivors. "The cancer treatments lead to fatigue," said DeNysschen, "and of course, if you feel tired, the last thing you want to do is exercise."

But DeNysschen's research suggests that exercise can minimize the side effects of some drugs used in treating cancer. A pilot study that looked

at the effect of exercise on [breast cancer patients](#) taking drugs known as aromatase inhibitors (AIs) showed that exercise diminished the [joint pain](#) experienced by some patients. "The problem is that patients stop taking the AIs because of the pain," said DeNysschen, "but the AIs reduce the risk of cancer recurring."

Each participant was assigned one of three exercise schedules based on the individual's fitness level. Each eight-week exercise regime included a video DeNysschen created that demonstrated resistance exercises, flexibility exercises, and—because joint pain in the hand and fingers is a common complaint for these patients—hand exercises. The exercises increased incrementally every two weeks. "We called every participant once a week to see how she was doing and to provide support and encouragement," said DeNysschen.

The [pilot study](#)'s results were promising. Patients reported not only less pain but also improved quality of life and greater ease performing daily activities. "It's just a start," said DeNysschen, "but it's a promising start."

A healthy diet—a plant-based diet that includes five servings of fruits and vegetables daily—goes hand-in-hand with exercise. "They work together synergistically," said DeNysschen, interlocking her fingers to illustrate her point. "Eating well is good, and moving is good, but to get the most out of a good diet and [regular exercise](#), you need to do both."

People who get cancer sometimes feel that they have lost control of their lives, DeNysschen has noticed. "If we can intervene and help patients change their diet and [exercise habits](#), it may help to reestablish a sense of control," she said. "For some people, establishing new habits while recovering from cancer can be empowering."

Provided by Buffalo State

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