



Women's Health

Enhance your health with a physiotherapist

Breast cancer— a chronic condition

Today, breast cancer is far more a chronic condition than a death sentence, thanks to dramatic improvements in early diagnosis and treatment.

By 2007, 5-year breast cancer survival had increased to 86%.¹

The lifetime probability of developing breast cancer is 11%, but the chance of dying of breast cancer is only 3.6%.²

Some chronic health conditions, including breast cancer, pelvic pain and urinary incontinence, are important concerns for women. These conditions can significantly affect a woman's health, physical and mental wellbeing, participation in daily activities, and even her identity as a woman.

Benefits in specific conditions

Physiotherapy can offer valuable benefits in chronic health conditions that are predominantly seen in women. Physical training can help women cope with the effects of breast cancer and its treatment. Also, specific therapeutic exercises can noticeably improve pelvic pain and urinary incontinence, whether these symptoms occur secondary to labour and delivery or occur earlier or later in life. Your physiotherapist will assess your problem, discuss your concerns, and develop a treatment plan that can help you return to an active life.

Breast cancer

Fatigue, a common side effect of chemotherapy and radiation, can linger even after treatment is finished. An exercise prescription from your physiotherapist can reduce fatigue and improve

physical functioning, cardiorespiratory fitness and well-being, even during treatment.^{3,4} Specific physiotherapy techniques can also reduce post-mastectomy pain and swelling (lymphedema) and improve lost range of motion and strength that may occur in the arm on the side of the surgery.⁵ Your physiotherapist can assess your overall fitness, identify specific problems resulting from surgery and/or radiation, and design an individual program that can support you during treatment and recovery, and help you cope with chronic symptoms that persist after medical recovery.

Chronic pelvic pain

Pelvic pain is chronic if it lasts at least six months. Living with chronic pelvic pain is draining, and can interfere with sexual intercourse, good sleep, hygiene and daily functioning. Although no specific cause

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can be identified in many women, pelvic muscle or nerve inflammation, pelvic muscle spasm, or postural problems affecting pelvic muscles and joints may be implicated.⁶ Your physiotherapist can assess your pain and develop an appropriate treatment program. Specific therapeutic exercises can stretch painfully contracted muscles, strengthen weakened muscles, and address postural problems that may be contributing to your pain.⁷ Physiotherapy can produce a substantial and lasting reduction in pelvic pain and let you focus on enjoying your life again.⁶

Incontinence

Urinary incontinence (the involuntary leakage of urine) is common in women, affecting up to 30% of women by 65 years of age.⁸ It should not, however, be dismissed as a normal sign of aging or long term effect of labour and delivery.

In addition to reducing wellbeing and activity levels, urinary incontinence can cause secondary health problems, such as urinary tract infections and skin ulceration⁹, and may lead to reduced fitness, quality of life and depression. Bladder and pelvic floor muscle training are proven treatments for improving symptoms of urinary incontinence, recommended by the International Continence Society as the first-line treatment for this condition.

Clinical studies have found that targeted exercise therapy can resolve or improve most types of incontinence.^{8,9} Age is no barrier in this condition, as women over 75 years of age can also benefit from physiotherapy.¹⁰ If you are experiencing urinary incontinence, talk to your physiotherapist about exercise therapy to eliminate or reduce your symptoms.

Ask a physiotherapist. No referral required.
Learn more at www.physiotherapy.ca or call 1-800-387-8679.

References

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About physiotherapy and physiotherapists

Physiotherapy is the primary healthcare profession that promotes wellness, mobility and independent function. University education, clinical and professional training provides physiotherapists with the knowledge they need to help people of all ages and abilities to improve their level of physical function. A thorough understanding of the human body in action, advanced skills in physical assessment, and experience in hands-on management allow physiotherapists to manage a broad range of medical conditions.

Physiotherapists can treat injuries and teach you how to prevent pain or injury that may limit your activity. They can also help you increase your mobility, relieve pain, build strength, improve balance and enhance cardiovascular performance.