

Moderate Physical Activity Prevents Breast Cancer Recurrence

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Although dozens of studies have been published in the past two decades demonstrating that physical activity has a modest protective benefit against developing breast cancer in healthy women (many of them highlighted previously in this column), a recently-presented retrospective study has shown that moderate levels of physical activity can actually prevent recurrence in women who have had breast cancer.

Dr. Michelle Holmes and her colleagues from Harvard University presented their study results at the annual meeting of the American Association for Cancer Research in March 2004. Their findings were from the ongoing Nurses Health Study that has followed almost 122,000 female nurses since 1976. Dr. Holmes and her colleagues reviewed the physical activity reports of 2,167 women who were diagnosed with stages I-III breast cancer after the study began.

Most of the women in this study simply walked for exercise. Those who walked for 1 - 3 hours/week, at a leisurely pace of 3 miles/hour (a 20-minute mile), reduced their risk of cancer recurrence by 25% (as compared to sedentary women).

Those women who were physically active for 3 - 8 hours/week reduced their recurrence risk by a whopping 50%! This latter finding is comparable to the benefits of taking tamoxifen for women who are estrogen receptor positive.

Their conclusion was that "even modest amounts of physical activity after a breast cancer diagnosis may promote survival."

In the 10 years that I have been interested in this line of research, this is by far the most compelling and exciting study to date. It offers hope to all of us that we can actually do something healthy to prevent recurrence. In addition, the benefits of aerobic exercise on the cardiovascular system are well-known - so that is certainly an additive effect.

So, please get out there and walk, jog, swim, bike, paddle, or carry out some type of sustained aerobic physical activity for at least 1-3 hours week - and more is always better!!!