



## The Role of Rehabilitation in Cancer Care

Rehabilitation is an essential part of cancer care, helping people manage the physical, emotional, and psychological challenges that come with cancer diagnosis and its treatment.



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Cancer rehabilitation is similar to the physical rehabilitation one might need after a stroke, orthopedic surgery, or injury such as a car accident. It includes a multidisciplinary approach that deploys services from physical, occupational, and speech therapists, as well as nutritionists and mental health professionals. These services are tailored to meet the needs of patients with cancer and, when used in combination, can help reduce the side effects of cancer treatments and improve a patient's quality of life.

Cancer and its treatments can cause issues such as pain, fatigue, weakness, and mobility challenges. Rehabilitation professionals help patients manage these issues with personalized treatment plans. Common problems include:

- **Pain:** Cancer-related pain can make daily activities difficult to execute. Rehabilitation can help manage and reduce pain through various techniques and therapies designed to alleviate discomfort and improve mobility.
- **Fatigue:** Cancer treatments often cause extreme tiredness. Rehabilitation helps patients to build stamina and manage energy levels through tailored exercise programs and energy conservation techniques.
- **Mobility and Strength:** Physical therapy improves strength, flexibility, and movement, helping patients stay independent after treatment. Therapists use specific exercises to target weakened muscles and improve overall function.
- **Cognitive Issues:** Chemotherapy can affect one's memory and concentration. Rehabilitation includes cognitive exercises and strategies to improve mental function and help patients cope with these changes.
- **Speech and Swallowing:** Some cancer treatments can affect speech and swallowing. Speech, language, and swallowing therapy can help patients regain these abilities through targeted exercises and techniques to improve muscle coordination and strength.
- **Pelvic Floor Rehabilitation:** Pelvic floor rehabilitation is a special type of physical therapy that helps men and women with pelvic floor issues. These problems can include urinary or bowel incontinence, frequent urination, constipation, and pelvic pain. Pelvic floor therapy involves exercises to strengthen these muscles and improve function.
- **Lymphedema:** A condition causing swelling due to lymph fluid buildup in tissues beneath the skin, lymphedema often results from cancer treatments that damage or remove lymph vessels and nodes. Specialized lymphedema therapists use techniques to reduce swelling, enhance limb function and mobility, and provide patients with education on managing symptoms.



"Lymphedema is a common complication associated with breast cancer, especially following surgery and radiation therapy. I urge my patients to monitor for signs of swelling and seek medical intervention as soon as possible if they notice any changes or discomfort," said Lisa Hopkins, MD, breast surgeon with Astera Cancer Care, who sees patients at Saint Peter's Breast Center.

"With cancer rehabilitation services, many patients are likely to be able to return to the life they love. Follow-ups ensure that any new issues are identified and managed promptly, allowing for early intervention and better outcomes," said Henry K. Tsai, MD, of Astera Cancer Care, chair of Radiation Oncology at Saint Peter's University Hospital. "Early intervention is the key to preventing complications, managing symptoms, and enhancing recovery after cancer."



### Cancer Care and Survivorship

"Survivorship focuses on supporting patients beyond their initial cancer treatment. It's about keeping them healthy, making sure they enjoy life, and helping them get back to doing their normal activities," said Bonnie Saunders, PT, DPT, MPA, manager, Physical Rehabilitation Services, Saint Peter's University Hospital.



Survivorship begins at the time of diagnosis and continues throughout a person's life. It often involves a range of services designed to help individuals live well beyond their cancer treatment such as:

- **Managing Long-term Effects:** Treatments like chemotherapy and radiation can have long-lasting impacts. Survivorship care addresses these effects, which can include fatigue, pain, and cognitive changes. Specialized programs help patients manage these long-term side effects and improve their day-to-day functioning.
- **Emotional and Psychological Support:** A cancer diagnosis and treatment can be emotionally taxing. Survivorship programs offer counseling and support groups to help patients cope with anxiety, depression, and the emotional toll of their journey. These services provide a safe space for patients to share their experiences and receive support from others who understand their challenges.
- **Healthy Lifestyle Guidance:** Survivors receive advice on nutrition, physical activity, and other healthy behaviors to improve their overall wellbeing and reduce the risk of other health issues. Guidance on maintaining a balanced diet, engaging in regular exercise, and avoiding harmful behaviors like smoking can help survivors lead healthier lives.
- **Rehabilitation Services:** Physical, occupational, and speech therapy are often part of survivorship care, helping individuals regain strength, mobility, and function.
- **Social Support:** Navigating life after cancer can be challenging. Survivorship care includes resources and support for returning to work, managing finances, and dealing with social and family dynamics. Programs may offer vocational counseling, financial planning assistance, and support groups to help patients adjust to life after cancer.
- **Monitoring and Follow-up:** Regular check-ups are essential to detect any signs of cancer recurrence and to monitor for long-term side effects of treatment.



