



A Model Cancer Wellness and Fatigue Management Program

BY TARA BALLARD, MES

Research suggests that about 90 percent of cancer patients receiving treatments such as radiation therapy, chemotherapy, immunotherapy, or bone marrow transplants have fatigue.¹ Reported causes of fatigue are anemia, pain, emotional distress, sleep problems, low thyroid gland function, medications, other medical problems (i.e., heart, lung), poor nutrition, and inactivity.

The *Strides to Strength* cancer wellness and fatigue management program at Presbyterian Cancer Center in Charlotte, N.C., integrates exercise, education, nutrition, and support into a medically managed program. The *Strides* multidisciplinary team offers patients the expertise and resources to address each individual's cause of fatigue. *Strides* staff bring unique, specialized skills that together create a comprehensive education and support system for cancer survivors going through the program. This novel approach to fatigue management allows patients to truly be assessed for all of the likely indicators of cancer-related fatigue, to receive tools to help, and to assume responsibility for their own fatigue management.

When the *Strides* program began ten years ago, little research existed on cancer-related fatigue and exercise. Nevertheless, the program's goals have always been supported by medical staff administration. This unwavering support, together with exuberant patient feedback, has allowed *Strides* to grow from 15 patients a year in its infancy to the more than 70 patients enrolled today.

More than a Workout

The *Strides* program, located in a stand-alone building one block from the Presbyterian Charlotte

campus, offers a clean, comfortable, exercise-friendly refuge for all adult cancer survivors. (By "survivors" we mean those in any stage of cancer treatment or recovery.)

Patients learn about the *Strides* program in a variety of ways including through physicians, medical staff, friends, and community programs. The ongoing 12-week/24-session program is offered on Tuesdays and Thursdays with four one-hour exercise classes to choose from each day. Classes are offered at 10:30 am, 11:30 am, 12:30 pm, or 5:30 pm. Each exercise class is limited to about 10-12 participants to allow for quality care.

Participants can train on 11 pieces of cardiovascular equipment including treadmills, arm ergometers, recumbent bikes, elliptical, and upright bikes; a full line of Nautilus strength training equipment; free weights; and stability balls. Classes follow a set format that includes: arrival, heart rate monitoring, weigh in and blood pressure check, group warm-up, group exercise with your personalized exercise prescription (such as cardiovascular training and/or strengthening or functional strength training), and, finally, relaxation as a group.

An oncology nurse specialist, social worker, oncology nutrition specialist, administrative assistant, and two exercise physiologists are all available to offer support and guidance for *Strides to Strength* participants. Each session is staffed by an oncology nurse specialist and an exercise physiologist. The social worker attends on Tuesdays for consults, support groups, "floor time," and also is available on other days as needed. The oncology nutrition specialist is available on Thursdays for consults, education, and "floor time."

Measurable Results

Our programmatic goal for *Strides* is to maintain or improve patient fatigue levels. In 2006, 87 percent of participants who completed the 24-session program maintained or reported improvement in their fatigue level. Of these, 78 percent were undergoing treatment. Perhaps even more important is the fact that participants enjoyed themselves while improving their level of fatigue. Eighty-four percent of participants reported excellence in quality of service, while 80 percent reported excellence in enhancing quality of life. Assessment tools include nurse admission intake information as well as FACT G and F questionnaires. In addition, the exercise physiologist conducts fitness assessments (six-minute walk test, circumference measurements, lymphedema measurements, body fat, strength, flexibility, functional, and posture).

The *Strides to Strength* focus remains on maintaining or improving fatigue through exercise, medical guidance, nutrition, education, and support. As positive results from studies on the effect of exercise on cancer fatigue continue to be published, the future of *Strides* becomes brighter and brighter. The hope is that one day *Strides* will be included in the treatment plans of all cancer patients. It is our firm belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to celebrate life with energy and zeal. 📍

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References

¹Cancer-Related Fatigue and Anemia. NCCN Clinical Practice Guidelines Version II/May 2003; 6.