

Swing Thru Cancer— Rx for Recovery

BY JOHN MALINOWSKI, ATC, CET



Research has shown that spending time outside makes us happier, reduces stress, and improves our overall health. Many know this already, but in a cancer setting, it can be difficult to offer outdoor recreation to patients. The traditional setting for a support group is people sitting in a circle, discussing their diagnosis, treatment, side effects, and the life changes that cancer can bring. Marian Cancer Care at Mission Hope Cancer Center, on California's central coast, looked to go beyond the traditional support group format and offer additional support to our patients—something new and fresh with life-long benefits.

Going Green

After much consideration, we determined an outdoor form of therapy would be of value to our cancer patients. Our decision was based on the benefits physical activity had to:

- Decrease fatigue
- Increase stamina
- Improve bone health, balance, and mood
- Help patients get to and maintain a healthy weight
- Help instill an overall sense of well-being in patients.

We even found research to support a more rapid return to normal blood pressure in those who exercise outdoors versus indoors.¹ In addition, some studies suggest that those who exercise in a green environment—like a golf course—perceive a lower rate of exertion compared to when they exercise in environments of other colors.² We wanted

to get patients and caregivers outside in a therapeutic environment with new and innovative challenges to look forward to. These decisions led our team to develop and implement *Swing Thru Cancer*, a unique support group that began seven years ago.

Swing Thru Cancer

Golf has been used as therapy for veterans for many years. Although our research had not found golf to be used as therapy for cancer patients, we decided to pilot the sport to see if it would bring the same benefits to this patient population. The goals of the program were simple—to be fun, safe, and low cost or free, like the other supportive care services we offer to our patients.

To most effectively meet these goals, Mission Hope Cancer Center needed a partner organization. We soon connected with Monarch Dunes Golf Course in Nipomo, which was eager to share the sport with our cancer patients. Fast forward seven years, and the partnership has flourished. Monarch Dunes Golf Course continues to donate its resources for this cause, and both organizations are privileged to experience the joy that patients get out from the *Swing Thru Cancer* program.

Clubs & Tees

The *Swing Thru Cancer* program is held twice monthly at the golf course. The PGA Director of Instruction teaches the golf lessons and the fitness trainer at Mission Hope Cancer Center assists with the mechanics of stretching, flexibility, balance, and the socialization aspect of the activity.

The program itself takes place on a 12-hole, par 3 portion of Monarch Dunes Golf Course that is specifically designed for new golfers.

Swing Thru Cancer participants run the gamut from patients who are currently undergoing treatment to those who have completed treatment months or even years before. In the current group, about half of the participants had never set foot on a golf course prior to joining the *Swing Thru Cancer* program. Interestingly, these newbie golfers are usually the first to sign up for the next class. Many patients bring a spouse or friend to enjoy the experience alongside them. Patients say that the biggest benefit of *Swing Thru Cancer* is learning something new with a support person by their side, including the other group members who understand their limitations or bad days.

“Living Social”


Cancer treatment is extremely difficult and can be socially isolating for many people. Some patients even isolate themselves from their own family members.

The social benefits of *Swing Thru Cancer* are more rewarding than we imagined. Participants enjoy the friendly competition of golfing, and it often increases their feelings of self-worth and helps with the healing process. Many participants have lunch together afterward or go to the course between sessions to practice. The bond developed between group members is even strong enough to overcome long distances. For example, a few of the program participants moved out of state but continue to check in to see how the “golf group” is doing. This behavior supports research

indicating that people are more apt to participate in physical activity when the social and entertainment aspects are emphasized rather than the health benefits alone.³

Just Rewards

This past year, Monarch Dunes received an award from a golf industry group for its participation in *Swing Thru Cancer*. Staff at Mission Hope Cancer Center realized it was time that we get the word out about this successful program. It is our belief that every cancer center should investigate partnering with a local community organization to offer fitness, socialization, and an opportunity for mindfulness in the beauty of the outdoors. In our experience, *Swing Thru Cancer* has been a positive

experience for not only our cancer patients and their families but also staff members and other in the community who have volunteered at the program. 

John Malinowski, ATC, CET, has been the fitness trainer for Marian Cancer Care at Mission Hope Cancer Center, Santa Maria, Calif., since 2014. He became a certified Cancer Exercise Trainer through the American College of Sports Medicine in 2015.

References

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effects on mood and perceived exertion. *Environ Sci Technol.* 2012;46(16):8661-8666.

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Our Program At-a-Glance

Marian Cancer Care at Mission Hope Cancer Center is accredited as a Comprehensive Community Cancer Center by the American College of Surgeons Commission on Cancer. This award recognition is the highest designation awarded to community cancer centers. As the first integrated oncology facility on the Central Coast, Mission Hope Cancer Center features advanced technology and expert healthcare professionals from the nation's top medical training programs. This state-of-the-art facility unites oncology treatment, imaging, research, education, and outreach services at one location.



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