

Physical Rehabilitation

What is physical rehabilitation?

Physical rehabilitation is the process of physically recovering from your cancer and adjusting to any physical changes you may experience. Cancer and its treatment affect some survivors' bodies more than others. You may have been able to physically recover from cancer on your own. Or, you may have a hard time physically adjusting to life after cancer and want to seek help from a medical professional.

Medical professionals who can help you with physical rehabilitation focus on:

- Restoring your independence
- Preventing other physical problems you may get from being inactive for so long
- Assisting you with adjustments from physical changes and disabilities
- Helping you physically handle day-to-day activities

For some survivors, life after cancer means learning how to live with major physical changes. You may have to find new ways to do things or change the things you do on a daily basis. This may affect you emotionally. It's perfectly understandable if adjusting to physical changes upsets you. The information in this document can help you identify whether you would benefit from getting help with your physical rehabilitation. If you want to learn more about how physical changes can affect you emotionally, you should talk to a mental health professional.

A physical rehabilitation plan is something you can develop with the help of your health care team. A part of your physical rehabilitation plan may be working with therapists who specialize in helping your body recover after cancer. These therapists can help you with physical changes throughout your survivorship.

Who can benefit from physical rehabilitation?

Recovering from cancer and its treatment is difficult for many survivors. Getting back to work, regaining your independence and feeling like you have enough energy to get through the day may take time. Physical rehabilitation is important for all survivors who feel that cancer or its treatment affected them physically. It's important to give your body some time to recover, but if you are struggling with your physical recovery at any time during your survivorship, you can talk to your health care team about physical rehabilitation.

Working with a therapist on physical rehabilitation is usually recommended for survivors who have a leg or arm amputated, receive a prosthetic, or experience any other serious physical change that interferes with their mobility or ability to physically function. It can also be helpful for survivors who experience minor physical changes but still have a hard time physically adjusting to life after cancer. If you feel like the physical effects of cancer

and its treatment are seriously interfering with your life after your treatment ends, you can ask a member of your health care team if you would benefit from help.

What are some signs that a survivor might benefit from help with their physical rehabilitation?

- You feel weak all the time
- You often lose your balance
- You have difficulty moving your arms and legs
- You don't have enough energy to get through the day
- You have muscular or orthopedic problems
- You have difficulty walking and going up stairs
- You have difficulty swallowing
- You have difficulty talking
- You are recovering from a major surgery
- You're having a hard time adjusting to major physical changes

Who can help a survivor with physical rehabilitation?

The type of physical rehabilitation therapist you should see will depend on your individual needs. You may need to learn how to use your muscles again. You may need to learn how to move around your home or conserve your energy so you can return to work. You may have trouble communicating with people because of physical changes to your face, mouth or throat. There are therapists who specialize in each of these areas.

A **physical therapist** can help you adjust to the physical changes in your body by teaching you exercises and physical activities that can help condition your muscles and restore strength and movement.

Examples of things a physical therapist may do:

- Evaluate your muscle strength, mobility and how well you can move your joints
- Teach you exercises that increase or maintain your range of motion, strength, flexibility, endurance, coordination, posture and balance
- Help you manage aftereffects from treatment
- Assist you in chronic pain management
- Design a self-care exercise program that fits your recovery needs

An **occupational therapist** will help you learn to manage your daily activities and incorporate any physical changes caused by cancer into your home and work life.

Examples of things an occupational therapist may do:

- Help you learn to use assistive devices like walkers, if needed
- Discuss with you possible changes in your home or workplace to accommodate your physical changes
- Show you ways to conserve your energy and plan your days
- Examine your hand/eye coordination
- Evaluate any cognitive changes cancer or treatment may have caused

A **speech therapist** will help you if you have difficulty talking or swallowing after your treatment for cancer.

Examples of things a speech-language pathologist (therapist) may do:

- Evaluate and train you in areas where you may have difficulty communicating
- Help you with difficulty swallowing
- Teach you about voice preservation and treatment in voice restoration
- Treat symptoms of memory loss and attention

How long should survivors work with therapists on their physical rehabilitation?

Some of the physical side effects that survivors experience are only temporary. You may want to participate in some kind of physical rehabilitation plan only while the temporary change affects your daily life. There are also physical side effects that may not happen until years after treatment ends. If these changes require adjustments in your daily life, you might benefit from physical rehabilitation. A progressive and ongoing physical rehabilitation plan may enhance the quality of your life at any time during your survivorship.

Depending on your specific issues, the length of the physical rehabilitation process can vary. Some insurance plans only cover a limited number of visits. You should ask your insurance company about the number of visits allowed in your plan if getting financial assistance to pay for your physical rehabilitation is important to you.

What are some suggestions for survivors who need help with physical rehabilitation?

- Create a strong physical rehabilitation plan with your health care team.
- Find a good physical rehabilitation therapist.
- Check to see if your insurance plan covers physical rehabilitation services.

Works Cited

Lance Armstrong Foundation Survivorship Topics

www.livestrong.org

Frymark, S. "Cancer Rehabilitation Services-The Road to Survivorship." Oncology Issues 14(6) (1999): 16-19.