EXERCISE AND BREAST CANCER

Let’s talk exercise in general. What does it mean to be “fit”, or “in shape”? Generally speaking fitness involves 3 types of exercise: flexibility, strength and aerobic. Flexibility means that your body is able to stretch and reach without straining yourself. Strength means the ability to lift objects safely. Aerobic means that your heart and lungs can handle a sustained activity for the time needed to complete that activity. There are many exercise programs, theories, and equipment that you can spend your money on, but they all fall into at least one of these 3 categories.

There are several questions that people have about exercise after surgery for breast cancer.

- When can I start exercising after surgery?
- Will exercise give me lymphedema?
- Can I lift weights?
- What about swimming?

WHEN CAN I START EXERCISE?
Timing is everything. When to begin exercise is the most important consideration. Early after surgery your job is to protect the incision and let everything heal. You can only do exercises that do not stretch the surgical area until cleared by your surgeon at your first post operative visit. In the mean time doing deep breathing, maintaining good upright posture, and even moving joints and using your muscles away from the surgical site are recommended. Once cleared by the surgeon you will be encouraged to regain any lost motion. This is best done slowly. Your physician or a physical therapist can help guide you as to the correct exercises and intensity, as well as what to expect regarding what pain is normal and what is a warning sign (there is a lot to learn here). During this recovery phase you may try to slowly increase your aerobic capacity by simple walking. Try to slowly increase the amount you can walk without making yourself fatigued. Strengthening will come later.
**WILL EXERCISE GIVE ME LYMPHEDEMA?**
Recent studies all show that exercise, even weight lifting will not cause lymphedema, and if done correctly will **help reduce lymphedema** if you have it. The type of exercise that will benefit you most and how much will vary from person to person. If you are in doubt as to what to do and when to start, please ask your Physician or care provider.

**CAN I LIFT WEIGHTS?**
Lifting weights will make your muscles stronger. Stronger muscles are less likely to strain from daily activity. Weight lifting, if done correctly, will not give you lymphedema or make lymphedema worse. It may also improve lymphedema if you have it. The most important aspect of lifting weights after surgery for breast cancer is to avoid the exercise and gym myths. You often hear things like “feel the burn”, or “no pain, no gain” These are things that will get you in trouble. Instead your new sayings are **“start low, go slow”, and “if it doesn’t feel right it probably isn’t”**. Pick a weight that is heavy enough to make your muscle tired after 8-12 repetitions. It is too heavy if you cannot do 8 repetitions. It is too light if you can do 15 or more repetitions and the muscle does not feel tired. When you no longer feel a tired muscle after the exercise it is time to increase the weight. Increasing the weight by 10-15% at the most is recommended. There are general exercises and specific exercises. If you are trying to target a specific area or resolve a problem, speak to a trainer or physical therapist for guidance. A compression garment can be worn during exercise as a precaution.

**WHAT ABOUT SWIMMING?**
Swimming is an excellent low impact exercise. You can get an aerobic benefit as well as a strengthening benefit. If you have lymphedema being in the water and exercising may improve your condition. Depending on the type of stroke you do you need to be sure that your shoulder ROM is enough so that you do not strain your shoulder, or another area of your body by compensating for limited range of motion. Stretching your arms and chest wall before and after swimming is recommended. You do not want to go into a pool if you have any areas that are not fully healed. If you are on chemotherapy you need to check with your care provider regarding you resistance to infection as you may not be able to swim in a public pool during your therapy.
In conclusion exercise can be of great benefit to you if done correctly and at the appropriate time. By taking some precautions and following basic guidelines you should not be afraid to exercise and do activities that you enjoy.