

# Script – Print – Tackling the effects of cancer

## Oncology Rehabilitation Helps Survivors Move On

Anne Hammes was in shock when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2009. As a registered nurse, Hammes knew the road ahead would be tough thanks to her treatment schedule of surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy. But she got through it and moved on with her life.

But a couple years ago, Hammes began experiencing discomfort along the chest wall on her left side, which made sleeping problematic. After consulting with her care team, Hammes was referred to a physical therapist who specializes in treating post-mastectomy patients.

“She said you have what we call radiation fibrosis, because it was exactly where I had received the radiation,” says Hammes, who is a post-lumpectomy patient. “And she said, I can help you. I nearly cried. I was just thrilled.”

Hammes isn’t alone.

Oncology rehabilitation is a program for people who have undergone treatment for cancer. It is designed to help patients return to normal activities. According to Robyn Johnson, who treated Hammes, cancer rehab has come to the forefront in the last few years since the Commission on Cancer of the American College of Surgeons has added it to its standards of accrediting cancer centers. Rehabilitation professionals play a vital role in creating a comprehensive cancer care plan for patients.

Oncology patients tend to have a multitude of functional limitations, therefore the care team can include oncologists, oncology nurse navigators and dietitians.

“Oncology rehab includes any rehab professional whether it's occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy working with an oncology patient throughout their treatment plan of care, whether that’s before they start treatment, after treatment or even during treatment,” says Robyn Johnson, a physical therapist with OSF HealthCare. “We work to help them maintain their best function.”

Therapists work with patients to create a customized plan to help manage symptoms and improve their quality of life.

Cancer rehab can help improve many physical problems, including:

- Swelling
- Weakness and loss of strength
- Balance issues
- Neuropathy or numbness and tingling in hands and feet

- Speech and memory problems

“What I see as a physical therapist are patients who are having pain, fatigue, range of motion or strength issues following surgery or chemo, whereas a speech language pathologist could be seeing patients having difficulty with swallowing, eating or memory issues,” says Johnson.

Initially, therapists develop baseline measurements to assess the effectiveness of the program for each patient. Educating patients on the various components of the program is also important, since many patients will learn exercises they can do at home. Exercises range from using resistance bands to increase strength to riding a recumbent bike.

Patients typically visit cancer rehab twice a week for four to 12 weeks, depending on the patient and their condition.

“If you think about exercise, in general, it releases endorphins, which gives you a positive feeling,” says Johnson. “You may be able to do something that you hadn’t been able to do while undergoing treatment. It just gives you that sense of a job well done; I am getting better and I can do things now that I wasn’t able to do before.”

Hammes is a believer. She worked with Johnson, who was able to relieve the pain that came from the radiation fibrosis. These days, Hammes is sleeping without discomfort and her range of motion has greatly improved. And she has advice for any cancer survivor who is dealing with lingering issues from surgery or treatment.

“I would say if things are bothering them or are getting worse, speak up. Speak up sooner,” says Hammes. “You’d be surprised that help is out there. People can help you with things that I wasn’t really expecting.”

For more information on oncology rehabilitation programs, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).