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Asheville health columnist says exercise may reduce breast cancer risk

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Dr. David Thomas / Special to the Citizen-Times

Written by Dr. David Thomas Guest columnist

FILED UNDER

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Breast cancer patients often ask oncologists, "What can I do to prevent cancer recurrence?" In many case, vigorous exercise may be just what the doctor orders.

More than 25 studies in the past two decades have shown the benefit of exercise in reducing the breast cancer recurrence risk by 40- 50 percent.

For example, in the Healthy Eating, Activity and Lifestyle study sponsored by the National Cancer Institute, following almost 1,000 women at several locations, showed 150 minutes a week of moderate activity reduced breast cancer recurrence by 67 percent compared with women who did not exercise.

How it works is not known, but exercise may affect the levels of hormones, insulin or the degree of inflammation.

In the Woman's Healthy Eating and Living study, half the participants adhered to a stricter diet of 15-20 percent calories from fat, plus three fruit and five colorful vegetable sources a day. They also exercised "to sweat" for 30 minutes, five days a week.

Alcohol and red meat intake was restricted, and a good vitamin D level was maintained in the blood. The risk of breast cancer recurrence was cut in half, to 7 percent from 14 percent.

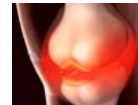
This benefit from exercise and diet was on the same order of magnitude as the benefit from chemotherapy.

Strenuous exercise may reduce hormone levels in the body, thus lowering the likelihood that breast cancer will appear, according to the National Cancer Institute.

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Women studied who were age 55 and younger and engaged in five hours a week of strenuous physical activity over a period of many years had a "significantly reduced risk" of breast cancer compared with those who had less than half an hour a week during the same time period, according to the California Teachers Study of 2007.

Women whose long-term exercise regimen was strenuous had a 55 percent reduction in the risk of estrogen-sensitive breast cancer. Those whose movement was moderate also reaped benefits: Their risk of estrogen-sensitive breast cancer was cut 47 percent.

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Dr. David S. Thomas practices at Mountain Regional Cancer Center, on the campus of MedWest-Harris in Sylva.

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