

Title:

Stepping into exercise: The experiences of women with cancer.

Abstract:

Evidence continues to emerge about the value of exercise following a cancer diagnosis and/or lymphoedema. Exercise is known to have multiple health benefits and this is also true for women following a cancer diagnosis.

Since 2002, BreaCan a Victorian statewide support service for women with breast or gynaecological cancer, has conducted fortnightly group exercise programs for women, some of whom have developed lymphoedema. Shorter term exercise programs have also been conducted.

Primary feedback from participants indicate that women have: limited knowledge of the lymphatic system and lymphoedema prior to its onset; anxiety about undertaking exercise following treatment due to loss of confidence in their bodies and lack of knowledge about appropriate exercise options. Following the program they indicated greater awareness of their bodies; improved knowledge of suitable exercises for them and increased motivation to continue with some form of exercise.

Our program evaluation indicates that women want a specialised and targeted exercise program that recognises the effects of treatment on their bodies and allows for a graduated program. As a result, BreaCan is exploring opportunities to work with other services to increase access of women to locally provided and appropriate exercise programs. Greater provision of information about lymphoedema and incorporation of practical exercises to increase lymphatic flow have also been highlighted. A further priority for the service is the development of a DVD of appropriate exercises for women following a cancer diagnosis and treatment. This will allow women to exercise at home and also increase women's access to information.