The Recovery Journey: Dealing with Fatigue

When speaking to our previous patients here at UC San Diego Health, many of them express increased levels of fatigue during their follow-up appointments. Some patients express this side effect shortly after their treatment or surgery, while many long-term cancer survivors still report the persistence of fatigue. While fatigue is a necessary tool for the body’s self-regulation, many cancer patients report significant fatigue that can interfere with their normal daily activities such as walking, cleaning their homes, or going back to work. Therefore, coping with fatigue is necessary to avoid detrimental social and economic consequences for our patients.

Many physicians used to recommend rest and the avoidance of physical activity. Exercise was once believed to be one of the causes of fatigue, but many studies are showing the opposite. In many studies, exercise has proven to normalize physical performance and reduce levels of fatigue. Cancer treatments, including surgery and chemotherapy, can cause the reduction in oxygen delivery to the cells, resulting in exhaustion after normal daily activities. Although it seems counterintuitive, exercise can actually increase energy levels. Evidence based studies suggest a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate exercise per week. Exercise has proven to increase muscle mass and plasma volumes, improve lung performance, and increase cardiac reserve. It can also boost your immune system and can help to normalize your blood glucose levels. Studies also show that resistance and strength training can reduce the loss of muscle mass that often relate to certain cancer treatments. There are many benefits to exercise.

Lastly, physical activity increases the feeling of control and independence. Fatigue is not just considered to be physical. Cancer survivors report loss of memory and concentration, which often leads to anxiety and fear. The ability to take control and make that push both physically and mentally to meet the exercise expectations will increase self-esteem. In many exercise studies in previous cancer patients, those who are able to meet the exercise requirements report...
improved social interactions, mood and mental endurance. We
understand it is hard after surgery to even think about exercising. Just
walking briskly every day has a multitude of benefits and will help in
your recovery.

Citations
(1999). Effects of physical activity on the fatigue and psychologic
status of cancer patients during chemotherapy.
51:1242.

Our Ambassador Program is
designed to help our patients get
connected and can serve as a
resource for the support needed on
the path to recovery. Please feel
free to reach out to us for any of
your questions and needs.

Patient Feature:
Judy Vasos

The night before I met with Dr. Lowy
in 2012 to discuss the recurrence of
appendix cancer originally
diagnosed in 2005, I was filled with
fear, confusion and lots of
questions. The most terrifying
unanswered question was: could the
medical team at UCSD help me
now that the appendix cancer had
moved to my abdomen? I was
grateful for an early morning
appointment so I had less time to
worry.

Everything I’d been told about the
medical team at UCSD made me
realize I’d been referred to the
experts in the treatment of appendix
cancer. Very little was known about
this rare disease in 2005 when I
was treated in Oakland, California
with chemotherapy treatment used
for colon cancer. I hadn’t kept up
with advances during the seven
years of my remission but my
friends encouraged me to consider
that new research may have led to
new treatments.

I wanted to believe them but my
fear was stronger. Gradually my
fear lessened as my husband and I
were greeted by the experts - the
warm, friendly and highly
professional members of the UCSD
team. And meeting Dr. Lowy
clinched the deal and put me in a
state of confidence and ease. He
first took the opportunity to carefully
and sensitively listen to the story of
what had brought me to the Center.
I told him we were traveling in
Europe in 2012 and by the end of
the trip I noticed my abdomen was
very distended and I felt very tired,
more than usual jet lag.

After an examination, Dr. Lowy
estimated I had over twenty pounds
of cancerous mucus in my
abdomen, mucus that had traveled
there from my original cancer.

The good news was that there was
a treatment. He clasped my hand,
looked me in my eyes and said the
words I very much wanted to
hear: "We can help you." The
treatment - HIPEC was a “big deal”
but had shown great promise. It
would involve a long operation
(eleven hours in my case) to
remove the mucus and organs
covered with the mucus in my
abdomen, followed by the
administration of heated
chemotherapy for ninety minutes,
enough time to kill microscopic
cancer cells but short enough to
avoid the adverse side effects of
systemic chemotherapy.

Dr. Joel Baumgartner would be
performing the operation assisted
by Dr. Lowy.

I spoke later with Dr. Baumgartner
and understood why Dr. Lowy was
so happy he had joined their team.
Surgery was scheduled for
September 17 - coincidentally the
date of Jewish New Year. I took it
as a good sign and felt confident
and happy this treatment was
available to me.

All went well with the surgery and
the attentive staff checked on me
every day to make sure my
recovery was going well. My room
had a window where I could enjoy
the light and a view of a little
garden. Walking was an important
part of recovery and one day as I
was walking in the hall, I saw Dr.
Baumgartner. We both smiled and
walked toward one another. When
we were close enough to speak, I
said the words I’d been feeling so
deply during my recovery: “Thank
you for saving my life.” He
responded, “Thank you, we’re all
just doing our job here.”

It’s been five years since those
words were spoken and I continue
to feel grateful to Dr. Baumgartner
and the entire staff at UCSD for
“doing their job”. I’m alive and well -
well enough to travel, complete a
book project, move to a new home,
spend time with family and friends,
attend yoga classes and walk my
dear dog Ruby daily.

Life is good. I’m glad to be living it.

Donations:
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support