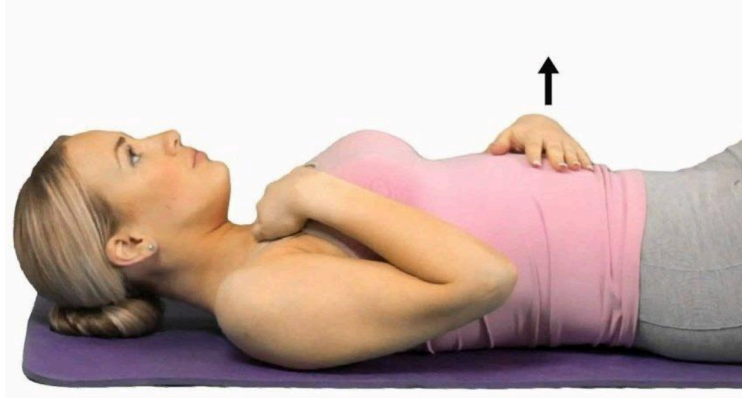


EXERCISE IS MEDICINE

Article written by Sara Mansfield, MS, NBC-HWC is a Wellness Exercise Specialist for the Healthy Living Program at Mayo Clinic



Through these articles, I hope to share some helpful information and guidance for managing well-being during and after treatment. Most of the information will be evidence-based and some from insights I have gained working with cancer survivors over my career. Although Thymic Carcinoma is a rare type of cancer, many of the general guidelines that are agreed upon will apply but I also hope to get specific as well, to help you take part in your own healing.

To begin, think about how you would answer the question, “How is your general health?”, and really consider all aspects of what the term health means. Not only physical health but mental, spiritual, social, etc. There are so many parts of ourselves to care for that it can be overwhelming at times. No one must be perfectly balanced...we are all works in progress, but the hope is to tend to our soft spots and find a working balance.

Exercise can be medicine.

Consider how your relationship is with your body now. Many with a cancer diagnosis can feel as if their body has failed them. A lost connection and identity to one’s physicality. When we speak of physical activity, we want to reframe how we view “exercise”. I’m not talking about the high intensity, no pain-no gain idea that we may or may not have aspired to in the past. Rather, the use of a “dose” of activity, therapeutically to help in building back a healthy connection between the mind and the body.



The good news is a general scientific consensus that exercise is not only safe but beneficial for cancer survivors. Even during treatment, the evidence keeps piling up, pointing to benefits in quality-of-life measures (mood, sleep, etc.) but also recently in slowing tumor growth and enhancing the ability to tolerate treatments. It has been a long time coming to prove something that seems so obvious. Exercise IS good. But... exercise is a large concept. Break it down to smaller bits and you get movement (the human condition), activity (daily choices), and exercise (intentional focus). In my opinion, this makes things much more accessible and less overwhelming when deciding how to approach building a movement-based routine that serves the purpose of what the body needs in the moment. All movement counts.

The body changes so much over the lifespan. Early development, transitions, reactions to lifestyle and occupation, and...illness and injury. One size of exercise program does not fit all.

So, where to start?

Take some time to think and plan before starting. What is your purpose? What do you enjoy? What leaves you energized? What are possible limitations? Where do you foresee barriers? How will you know if you're seeing benefits?

Many times, writing in a journal will help you determine the answers to these questions, and this will set you on the path that reflects your needs and values.

Here are a few examples of how to begin.

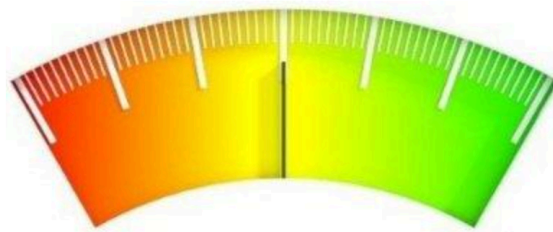


Purpose:

What's the goal? Do you want to just feel better on a day-to-day basis or address a side effect that tugs your well-being in a negative direction? Or maybe, you have grander versions of getting back to the powerhouse you once were before your diagnosis. The answer to this helps you align your actions with your purpose and helps with motivation.

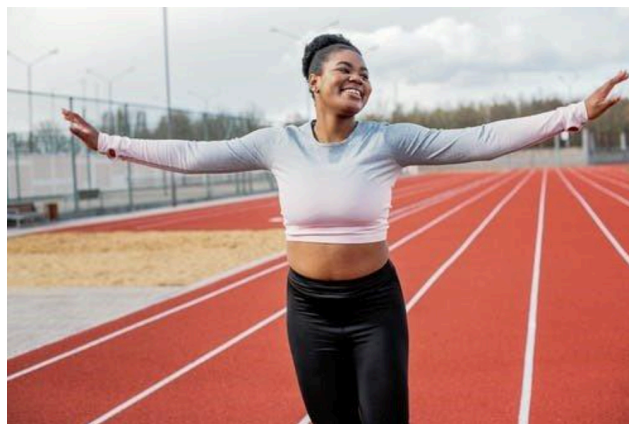
Energy:

What do I have to give today? As most know, every day during the cancer journey can be different. Sometimes you feel good, sometimes you don't. Match your activity with your energy. If you can leave your body wanting more instead of "leaving it all out there", you keep some in reserve for the restoration to begin.



Consideration:

What are some of my medical considerations? For example, scarring and tenderness can be a limiting side effect from radiation or surgery. While care needs to be taken for healing, waiting too long to establish fuller range of motion can limit progress. As tissue begins to heal, thoughtful and measured movement can remodel and ensure that your injured tissue regains normal range of motion, strength and mobility. Failure for scar tissue to remodel correctly can lead to mobility loss and tightening of fibers that make movement difficult.

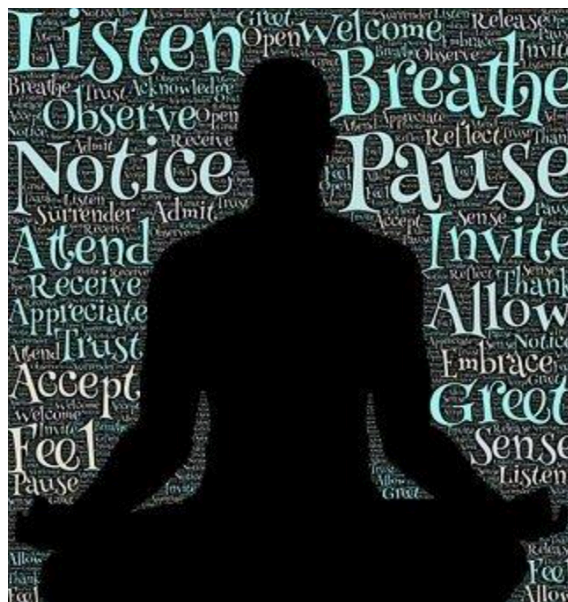


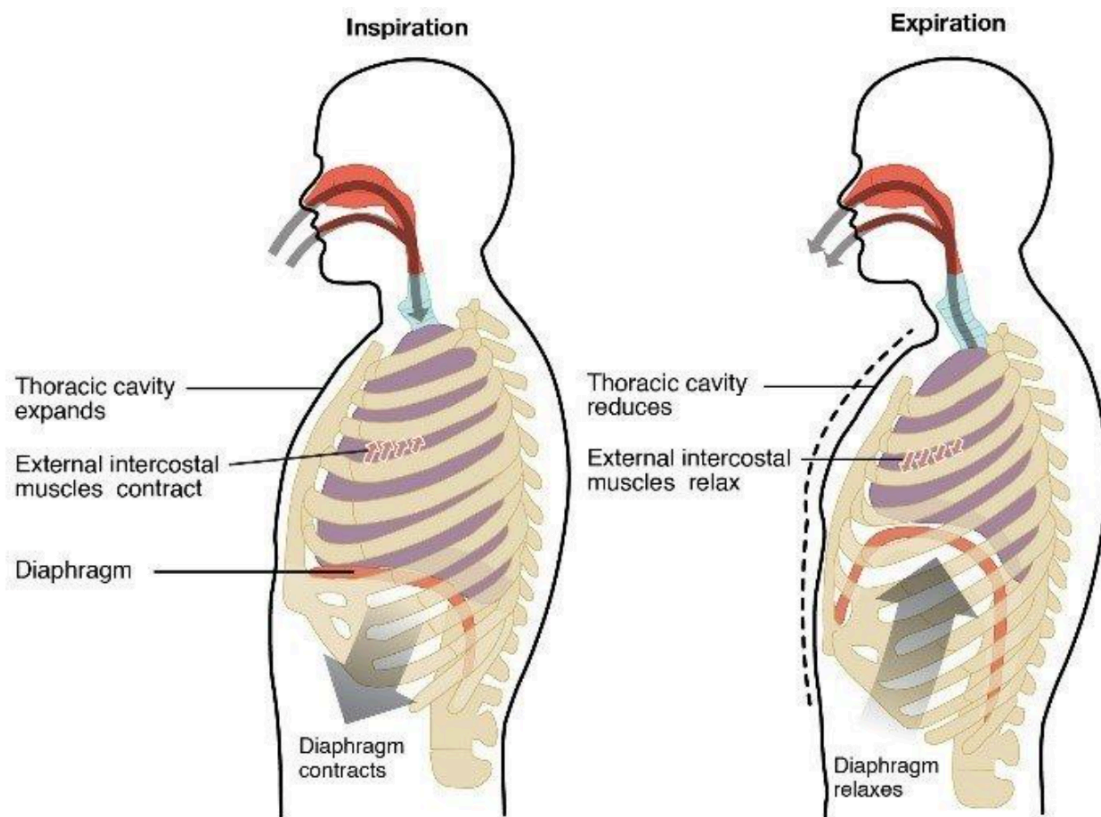
Practice of the Day:

Breath Exploration.

Sit or lie in a posture that helps you be both comfortable yet alert. Place one hand on your chest and one hand on your stomach, just below your belly button. Do a brief scan of your body and let go of any strong tension you may be feeling. If you are comfortably supported, this should be easy to do. Clear your mind of any pressure to “do this right”. You have been breathing your whole life so you aren’t learning anything new. Focus on how your breath feels to you. In your nostrils, in your lungs, in your body. This is a fact-finding mission to observe what kind of default breathing patterns you assume all day long. Do you feel pushback or resistance, as if your body has trouble absorbing the inhalation or letting go of the exhalation? Be curious and learn where you are starting from.

As you ease into a bit more comfort with the breath focus, notice how long your inhalations and exhalations are. Quick or slow? Counting helps to see if they match up. After a few cycles, gently try to slow them down. Maybe by just an extra count. This involves opening yourself up to a deeper breath that involves the diaphragm at the base of your abdomen. Believe it or not, you are doing strength and mobility exercises here. The muscles surrounding your chest and abdominal cavity are getting a workout. When we breathe in a shallow and quick pattern, we lose out on the movement. Practicing this will help you utilize your breath as a tool to help reduce stress, regulate pain, and also to find balance.





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Sara Mansfield, MS, NBC-HWC is a Wellness Exercise Specialist for the Healthy Living Program at Mayo Clinic. She holds a Bachelor of Science and Master of Science degree in Kinesiology from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, is a National Board-Certified Health and Wellness Coach, and is certified through the American College of Sports Medicine as a Certified Exercise Physiologist and a Cancer Exercise Trainer with an Exercise is Medicine® credential. For over 25 years, Sara has worked in a variety of capacities in the health and wellness field, with a specific interest in building lasting healthy lifestyle changes for individuals who have been affected by cancer. Sara's goal is to expand awareness of the endless possibilities for movement and to make movement accessible to all.

