



Physical Activity for the Breast Cancer Survivor

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According to the National Breast Cancer Research Institute breast cancer is the second most common form of cancer in women today and more than 2,000 women are diagnosed in Ireland every year. It not only affects women, men can develop breast cancer also.

Types of breast cancer surgery & treatments

Lumpectomy is the removal of the breast tumor (the “lump”) and some of the normal tissue that surrounds it. Lumpectomy is a form of “breast-conserving” or “breast preservation” surgery. The amount of tissue removed can vary greatly.

Mastectomy is the removal of the whole breast. There are five different types of mastectomy: (1) “simple” or “total” mastectomy, (2) modified radical mastectomy, (3) radical mastectomy, (4) partial mastectomy, and (5) subcutaneous (nipple-sparing) mastectomy.

Chemotherapy treatment uses medicine to weaken and destroy cancer cells in the body, including cells at the original cancer site and any cancer cells that may have spread to another part of the body. Chemotherapy, often shortened to just “chemo,” is a systemic therapy, which means it affects the whole body by going through the bloodstream.

Radiation therapy — also called radiotherapy — is a highly targeted, highly effective way to destroy cancer cells in the breast that may stick around after surgery. Radiation can reduce the risk of breast cancer recurrence by about 70%. Despite what many people fear, radiation therapy is relatively easy to tolerate and its side effects are limited to the treated area. (Ref: [http:// www.breastcancer.org](http://www.breastcancer.org))

There are a number of **side effects** that affect the body after surgery and treatments i.e. reduced range of motion, muscle weakness, fatigue, pain, temporary swelling, difficulty in maintaining good posture and also, fear of moving the joint.

Why Pilates

Pilates is a perfect exercise routine for a breast cancer survivor to participate in, as the exercises are slow and controlled. This enables the client to restore full strength and mobility allowing them to return to their regular daily activities. The aim of a Pilates programme is to restore full mobility and activity of the arm and shoulder girdle and strengthen the core stabilizers through safe and effective exercises. Improving shoulder girdle function translates into freedom of movement. The experience of moving the joint without pain can in itself empower the participant.

How can pilates help?

1. Scapular humeral rhythm will be disturbed post surgery. The glenohumeral joint is the most freely moveable joint in the body. The position and stability of the humeral head affects the shoulder girdle. The axis of rotation of the humeral head should be stable so that it is centered in the glenoid fossa during movement.

- Regaining normal arm movement through specific pilates exercises

can help improve this rhythm.

2. Holding tension in the upper back and neck muscle may result from pain experienced by the patient when moving affected area, response is to restrict movement to avoid the pain.
 3. Pectoral Major and Latisimis Dorsi can tighten, causing misfiring around gleno-humeral joint. If the pectorals major and latissimus dorsi muscles alone depress the head of the humerus, they will act to medially rotate it, which can alter the timing of the arm movement and the starting posture of the humerus on the glenoid cavity. (ISP Stott Pilates) This can be particular important area if the client has had reconstruction, and the tissue has been harvested from the latissimus dorsi muscle.
- Pilates helps the survivor relearn normal shoulder and arm movement in a safe and effective way. This encourages the client to use the affected arm in a safe way outside the studio.
 - Breathing exercises alone can help reduce the tone of tight muscles post surgery and encourage lymphatic drainage. Improving the flow of lymph fluid can help reduce the risk of lymphedema. The breath is an important part of the Pilates method as research has proven that on the exhale phase the muscle relaxes. Teaching participants how to relax their muscles is a hugely important aspect of recovery as these clients will be experiencing high levels of anxiety and stress from the time of diagnosis to surgery right through to their recovery period.

What are the benefits of Pilates for a breast cancer survivor?

- Restored joint mobility;
- Tissue integrity – scapular humeral rhythm;
- Regain loss of strength;
- Stimulate lymph system;
- Increased endurance levels;
- Reduced stress and anxiety;
- Strengthened self confidence;
- Feeling normal again, on the road to feeling yourself again.

Exercises addressing the stability and Range of motion of Shoulder girdle:

- **Press and Release;** helps to mobilize the shoulder blades on your rib cage.



- **Open Chest;** improves shoulder joint mobility & strengthens mid and lower traps. This helps to rebalance the muscle tissue of the arm.



- **Elevation;** This is a beneficial exercise for a survivor to perform as the weight of the affected area is supported by the floor. This reduces the clients fear of hurting the joint, while safely stretching across the pectoral area.



Advantages of Pilates for someone fighting or surviving Breast cancer:

Pilates involve GENTLE exercises which require very SPECIFIC movements that are both slow and controlled. Participating in Pilates programmes enhances wellbeing along with increased endurance. It allows the performer to take control of their body. It feels good for the client to be able to move the whole body again, they feel really empowered.

When is it safe to start Pilates Post-surgery?

After breast cancer surgery the client will be up and walking around within days. It is safe to participate in a pilates programme 6 weeks post surgery provided he/she has been given consent from his/her medical team.

Phase one: 6 weeks (post surgery) starting R.O.M and balance exercises

- Exercise more frequently, reduced duration e.g. 3xweekly 20mins;
- Leverage should be short;
- Minimize sideline, if causes discomfort;
- Minimize range of motion if causing pain to affected area;
- Use lots of propping;
- No overhead movements;
- Exercises should be gentle and progressive to restore full mobility & muscle balance.

Phase two: 12 weeks start strengthening exercises

- Low load;
- Low reps;
- Limit overhead movements;
- Support limbs on affected side.

Guidelines for reconstructive surgery

There may be more than one surgery during reconstruction, this can happen over several weeks or months. Generally reconstruction is performed at a later date after mastectomy. It is important to note that tissue may be harvested from the abdominal, back or glutes area. You need to be aware of this additional incision site. Rehabilitative exercise and recovery will have to occur after each subsequent surgery see phase one.

Embarking on a Pilates programme can help improve side effects from Breast cancer surgery & treatments. This can empower & help the survivor regain control of their body and improve their strength and endurance levels. Clients who have participated in pilates programmes have experienced increased confidence, a feeling of normality, success and increased energy levels.

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Specific references available upon request

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