



Breast Cancer Recovery and Pilates

By Jill Wheeler

As part of Breast Cancer Awareness Month, Jennifer Gerali and Pilates, Fitness & Therapeutics, Inc. would like to honor and acknowledge women and families living with and recovering from breast cancer. People of all ages and backgrounds are finding strength, rehabilitation and fitness through Pilates. Studio director, Jennifer Gerali, provides a gentle approach to women survivors of breast cancer who are at a place in their recovery where they can begin to restore their bodies physically and emotionally.

What is Pilates?

Pilates is a program of exercise that supports mind-body awareness and teaches proper structural alignment, postural integrity and increases control and mobility of movement. Creator Joseph Pilates brought "Pilates" to the United States in the early 1920's to increase the performance, strength, and flexibility of elite dancers and athletes. Pilates, as an exercise regime, entered the mainstream fitness world about 20

years ago and is currently a foundational element of the everyday person's workout with more than 12 million people practicing world-wide.

Increasingly, occupational and physical therapists are incorporating Pilates techniques to support the recovery of various illnesses and conditions. Pilates is based on lengthening and strengthening of the muscular-skeletal system using resistance and conditioning techniques that emphasize spinal structural integrity, scapular stability, and spinal rebalancing.

How can Pilates Help Breast Cancer Survivors?

Pilates is a gentle fitness practice that can help ease breast cancer survivors back into an exercise program. Pilates is also a wonderful and life-affirming way for women to reconnect with their bodies. With individualized special attention, Jennifer can customize her approach to working with women in various stages of recovery.

Jennifer has worked with cancer survivors both pre- and post- surgery. Many women face fear returning to exercise after undergoing intensive and often invasive surgical treatments. Many feel a sense of detachment from their bodies and depression from facing a life-threatening illness. Pilates encourages mindful movement while reconnecting with the beauty and strength in each individual. Pilates, in general, can increase muscle strength which may prevent some post-surgery muscle loss. Pilates is also a great form of exercise for cancer survivors who may still be struggling with fatigue during and after recovery. It is a low-impact activity that produces empowering and long-lasting results, while increasing endurance over time.

Increases Range of Motion

Because Pilates emphasizes quality over quantity, the practice is designed to flow at the client's pace. The goal is for women to listen to their bodies and practice building various muscles groups in a balanced way. Joseph Pilates

emphasized a symmetrically developed body, while at the same time knowing that everyone had various asymmetries. Pilates exercises are designed to strengthen and lengthen weakened or stiff areas, which makes it ideal for rehabilitative work, giving those areas a chance to “catch up”. The shoulder, neck and chest movements may be restricted following breast cancer surgery; Pilates exercises slowly increase the range of motion by teaching proper scapular stabilization and shoulder blade alignment. Additionally, many exercises can be performed comfortably lying on the back while slowly increasing the strength to these areas and ultimately progressing to more advanced exercises and positions.

Supports Posture

Women often have concerns about their posture following surgery. Many women feel like a “stranger” in their own bodies and don’t feel they recognize themselves anymore. Rounded shoulders, tight chest muscles and weakened abdominals are all common areas of concern following treatment that can be addressed in Pilates with guided imagery and strengthening exercises. Jennifer implements postural exercises in every session, allowing for gentle, gradual and long-lasting results. Pilates is perfect for increasing flexibility and restoring alignment, again common concerns of survivors who have restrictive movement due to uncomfortable treatment regimes and surgery.

Helps with Lymphedema

Lymphedema, a condition in which excess fluid collects in tissue and causes swelling can be a concern for breast cancer survivors returning to exercise. Pain and swelling may occur in

the arm or lymph nodes in the underarm after treatment. Women may have been told to limit exercise to reduce pain and trauma to the affected areas. As a result, the arm becomes weaker and everyday activities may be difficult. Pilates is great for gradually stabilizing the nearby areas while slowly restoring arm strength. Because abdominal work is the foundation of Pilates, many women can develop strength in other less affected areas while rehabilitating the upper body.

The emphasis of deep and rhythmic breathing may help clients manage lymphedema, as proper breathing can promote lymphatic drainage. Relaxation and stress reduction is a great benefit of deep inhalation and exhalation, as well.

Pilates is a great exercise for developing and nurturing a mind-body awareness and practice. The aforementioned benefits combined with these body-affirming, life-affirming exercises can help bolster self-esteem, confidence and emotional and physical resiliency. Pilates can help bring balance to a survivor’s life so that everyday life is easier and more fulfilling; from carrying the groceries, to playing golf or returning to work, self-reliance and quality of life is restored. As Jennifer’s clients, survivors can be sure their comfort, health and wellness are her first priority. Offering nearly twenty years of education; a Bachelor degree in Psychology, a Masters degree in Holistic Nutrition, and current enrollment in a Doctoral program in Natural Health, Jennifer’s practice is a great place to start re-connecting with your fitness and wellness needs.

Pilates Benefits:

- Improves lymphatic drainage with proper breathing techniques (Jordan 2007)
- Improves shoulder girdle mechanics, specifically scapulo-humeral rhythm, to aid in the breakdown of scar tissue and frozen shoulder
- Restores overall range of motion, flexibility, strength and endurance
- Restores postural alignment and balance
- Increases strength of local and global stabilizing muscles
- Develops abdominal strength and endurance
- Improves overall kinesthetic awareness
- Re-establishes proper muscular patterns
- Reduces both physiological and emotional stress
- Improves appearance and athletic performance
- Increases self-confidence and overall well-being
- Heightened mind-body awareness and appreciation

Always consult your physician prior to beginning any type of exercise during and following medical treatment. Jennifer will require medical releases from your physician as deemed necessary prior to beginning any workouts.



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