

## Palliative Rehabilitation: Enhancing Function and Quality of Life in Advanced Cancer

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### DESCRIPTION

Cancer rehabilitation is an evolving field that plays a crucial role in the holistic management of cancer patients, yet it remains underemphasized in mainstream cancer care. Traditionally, the focus of oncology has revolved around diagnosing and eradicating cancer through surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and newer targeted therapies. However, as survival rates improve and the number of cancer survivors continues to grow, the conversation around survivorship and quality of life becomes increasingly important. Rehabilitation, in this context, is not simply about physical recovery it is about enabling individuals to live as fully and independently as possible during and after cancer treatment.

Cancer is a disease that affects not only the body but also the mind and spirit. The journey from diagnosis through treatment and beyond is marked by profound challenges that alter a person's physical functioning, psychological well-being, social roles, and overall sense of self. Rehabilitation recognizes these multi-faceted effects and aims to address them in a comprehensive and personalized manner. It spans the entire cancer care continuum, from the moment of diagnosis to end-of-life care, with the primary objective of helping patients regain control over their lives.

One of the most immediate benefits of cancer rehabilitation is the management of physical impairments caused by cancer and its treatments. Fatigue, pain, neuropathy, lymphedema, cognitive dysfunction, and mobility limitations are just some of the issues faced by patients. Physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, and rehabilitation physicians are trained to assess these challenges and design interventions that restore function and reduce discomfort. For example, a breast cancer survivor experiencing arm swelling due to lymphedema can benefit significantly from specialized manual therapy and compression techniques that reduce swelling and restore arm function. Similarly, a patient undergoing chemotherapy who struggles with balance issues may find physical therapy helpful in regaining stability and preventing falls.

Beyond the physical domain, cancer rehabilitation encompasses psychological and emotional recovery. A cancer diagnosis can trigger a range of emotional responses, including anxiety, depression, fear, and uncertainty. These emotions can persist long after treatment ends, sometimes intensifying as the reality of survivorship sets in. Rehabilitation professionals, including psychologists and counselors, work to help patients process their experiences, build coping strategies, and reconnect with a sense of purpose and identity. Cognitive rehabilitation is another important area, particularly for individuals experiencing "chemo brain" or cancer-related cognitive impairment. Interventions may involve memory exercises, organizational strategies, and adaptive techniques that help patients navigate daily life more effectively.

Another essential aspect of cancer rehabilitation is vocational rehabilitation helping patients return to work or adapt to new roles. For many individuals, employment is a source of identity, financial security, and social interaction. The ability to return to work can be a powerful indicator of recovery and normalcy. Yet, cancer treatment can significantly disrupt a person's capacity to perform job-related tasks. Rehabilitation professionals assess functional capacity, provide job retraining or task modifications, and communicate with employers to facilitate reintegration into the workplace. This support helps reduce the economic burden of cancer while enhancing the individual's sense of self-efficacy.

Social reintegration is another vital yet often overlooked dimension of cancer rehabilitation. Social isolation is a common experience among cancer patients and survivors, who may feel misunderstood, stigmatized, or simply too unwell to participate in social activities. Rehabilitation programs often include support groups, peer mentoring, and community engagement initiatives that foster connection and reduce the sense of isolation. These social dimensions of recovery are particularly important for individuals from marginalized or underserved communities, who may face additional barriers to accessing care or support.

Spiritual well-being also finds a place within the broader scope of cancer rehabilitation. For many, confronting cancer raises profound existential questions about the meaning of life,

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suffering, and mortality. Chaplains, spiritual counselors, and integrative therapists play a role in helping individuals explore these questions, draw on their spiritual resources, and find peace amid uncertainty. Although spiritual care may seem

peripheral to traditional medical treatment, it has been shown to improve psychological outcomes and enhance the quality of life for many cancer patients.