

# Empowering Patients, Enhancing Outcomes

Maple Tree promotes exercise as a means for improving patients' quality of life.

**T**raditional cancer treatments—including radiation and chemotherapy—are more effective than ever in extending and saving lives. The side effects of such treatments, however, can severely impact patient recovery and may include fatigue, nausea, depression, and memory or concentration problems. Until recently, it was generally suggested by members of the medical community that people with cancer avoid exercise as a means to minimize such side effects.

But that all began to change in the late 1990s as researchers delved deeper into the connection between exercise and cancer recovery. Today, more than 13,000 published articles and studies support the role of exercise in relieving treatment-related side effects.

Karen Wonders, Ph.D., is the Founder and Director of Maple Tree Cancer Alliance, a Dayton-based organization committed to improving the quality of life for individuals battling cancer. A national leader in setting the standard for exercise oncology, Maple Tree Cancer Alliance currently operates in seven area hospitals, providing—along with nutritional guidance and spiritual and emotional support—free exercise programs to help relieve many of the debilitating side effects patients are likely to encounter.

## The Positive Impacts of Exercise Oncology

“The protective effects of exercise in cancer patients are undeniable,” Wonders says. As evidence, she offers up the results of a retrospective study of all cancer patients treated at partner hospitals.

“We reviewed the cases of 1,400 cancer patients with no co-morbidities. Of these, 658 were Maple Tree Cancer Alliance patients. Those who have participated in our programs reported significantly fewer side effects—especially fatigue, pain, and cardiac dysfunction—than their sedentary counterparts,” she explains. “Additionally, patients and hospitals realized more than \$7 million in cost savings as a result of our programs in the form of fewer ER visits, fewer 30-day hospital readmissions, and shorter hospital stays.”



Karen Wonders, Ph.D.

## Patient-Centered Exercise Interventions

At Maple Tree Cancer Alliance, each exercise intervention is individually tailored and delivered one-on-one by trainers who are specially certified to work with cancer patients from diagnosis through remission. Plans typically focus on increasing cardiovascular endurance and muscular strength, as well as balance training, and improving flexibility.

“Cancer is one area in which the combination of aerobic exercise and strength training improves quality of life and overall physical health,” Wonders adds. “Even

more important is the empowerment and sense of control patients feel knowing they are actively taking steps to improve their own well-being.”

Despite strong clinical and anecdotal evidence, though, there's still a long way to go in growing the acceptance of exercise oncology in the mainstream. While Maple Tree Cancer Alliance works with 66 percent of all cancer patients treated by partner hospitals, less than 5 percent of cancer patients nationally are referred to similar programs.

Wonders, of course, is working to change that and is in the process of expanding the Maple Tree Cancer Alliance beyond the Miami Valley. She expects satellites to open in Pittsburgh and Wisconsin this year and has plans to expand nationwide within the next three years.

“I've made cancer research my life's work,” she says, “in the hopes of helping to heal the sick, improve remission rates, and lower mortality rates. Exercise oncology is one step in the right direction.”



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