
Fatigue Affects Balance in Women Post Breast Cancer Treatment



As of 2021, breast cancer has become the most common cancer in women in the United States. Fortunately, advances in screening, diagnosis and treatment have increased women's survival rate to 90%. But despite these advances, nearly two-thirds of women diagnosed with breast cancer experience long-term side effects from treatment or breast cancer itself. Some of these side effects include "physical or functional performance limitations, imbalance, impaired gait, and an increased risk of falls" (Wechsler et al. 2022). Additionally, fatigue is considered to be one of the most common side effects of cancer treatment.

A recent study aimed to investigate the association between fatigue and balance issues in women diagnosed with breast cancer. The study included 43 women aged between 30 to 85 diagnosed with stage I to stage III breast cancer who had undergone chemotherapy a minimum of one year before participating in the study.

A standard physical function test was performed on the study participants. These tests involved balancing on one leg, alternating from sitting to standing, and balancing after exercising the feet and legs. Post exercises, any amount of swaying was measured and used to indicate the presence and severity of balance issues in women.

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In addition to the practical test, researchers requested participants to complete a standard survey to record their fatigue and physical activity levels per week. They also used a standard tool to see if women had neuropathy, defined as damage to the nerves of the peripheral nervous system that causes pain or discomfort. Overall, fatigue and neuropathy accounted for 10% and 1% of the swaying, respectively.

The results of the study demonstrate that the greater the level of fatigue, the higher the likelihood of swaying from front to back. The more severe the fatigue, the higher the likelihood of swaying after completing exercises that exhausted their legs and feet, accounting for approximately 7% of the swaying. Neuropathy accounted for approximately 3% of swaying.

Study researchers explain, "our results...indicate that [cancer-related fatigue], even several years following exposure to chemotherapy, may distinctly influence balance independent of a patient's [chemotherapy-induced peripheral neuropathy] status".

The results are important as cancer-related fatigue impacts up to 30% of individuals after completing their primary cancer treatment. These findings indicate that it is possible to suffer from balance issues if experiencing fatigue, whether or not the individual has neuropathy.

Completing exercise tasks that bring about additional fatigue in the legs and feet can indicate that the individual experiences worse balance.

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