Currently, there are over 12 million cancer survivors in the United States, more than a quarter of which are breast cancer survivors. The improvement in breast cancer survival is attributable to both improvements in early detection and treatment as well as targeted therapies. As a result, cancer survivorship has been deemed a distinct phase of care along the cancer continuum, during which it’s important to address the late effects of treatment and second malignancies. Educating patients about nutrition and lifestyle modifications can reduce the risk of cancer recurrence and death. This responsibility is often delegated to oncologic nurses.

Dangers of Weight Gain
Recent studies have shown that weight gain over 13 lbs following a breast cancer diagnosis is associated with a greater risk of recurrence and death. In addition, women with BMIs of 25 kg/m² or higher at the time of diagnosis have poorer prognoses. As a result, organizations such as the American Cancer Society and the American Institute for Cancer Research have recommended that women strive to get their BMIs between 20 kg/m² and 25 kg/m². Patients with BMIs above the recommendation should be encouraged to diet and exercise because even small amounts of weight loss can reduce breast cancer recurrence risks in overweight women. Those with normal BMIs should also be advised to avoid weight gain.

Benefits of Nutrition & Exercise
Breast cancer survivors should be educated on the importance of eating a healthy, low-fat diet that includes more fruits and vegetables and lower intakes of red meat and processed foods—less than 20% of calories consumed should come from fat. Most importantly, patients should be educated about portion control. Although supplement use is reported in 25% to 80% of cancer survivors, there’s no solid evidence that they reduce recurrence. As such, nutrients are best obtained through food.

Exercise should be an integral part of a breast cancer survivor’s daily routine. The Nurse’s Health Study found that women who exercised moderately after breast cancer diagnoses had a 20% to 50% reduction in their risk of breast cancer death or recurrence. Patients should be encouraged to obtain at least 30 to 60 minutes of physical activity 5 to 7 days a week; for overweight women, exercise goals should be 1 hour each day of the week. Weight-bearing activity (e.g., walking, jogging, and stair climbing), upper body lifting, and resistance exercises should also be encouraged. Following these exercise recommendations has been shown to promote bone health, reduce fatigue, improve stamina, decrease emotional distress, improve body image, and improve cognitive function in breast cancer survivors.

Patients should receive a survivorship care plan that summarizes the treatments being received and the important issues to be aware of so that secondary malignancies can be prevented and late treatment effects can be minimized. If opportunities for discussion are not available, a targeted program should be arranged to address these needs.

Carole Martz, RN, MS, APN, AOCN, has indicated to Physician’s Weekly that she has or has had no financial interests to report. For more information on this article, including references, please visit: www.physweekly.com.