**BREAST CANCER**

Cancer statistics estimate that about 1 in 8 Canadian women will develop breast cancer. Chances are that you, a friend or a family member has undergone breast cancer treatment such as surgery, chemotherapy, radiation and reconstructive procedures. Diagnosis and treatment leave significant physical, mental and emotional tolls, with fatigue, pain and overwhelm being universal complaints.

With so many changes and challenges, individuals are often unsure of what is best for their bodies. Having the guidance of a knowledgeable, compassionate therapist can ease some of this stress. Early guided intervention helps the body recover faster from treatment side effects and minimizes strength and flexibility loss. Patients are better able to manage pain and fatigue. Manual therapy techniques reduce scar tissue, improve range of motion and lower pain levels. As the intensive phase of cancer treatment ends, a gradual return to usual activities can be achieved through a slowly progressed strengthening, flexibility and endurance program.

Specialized treatment may also be necessary to manage a chronic condition called lymphedema. When lymph nodes have been removed or damaged, the lymphatic system becomes compromised which can result in swelling of the affected area. Following breast cancer treatments such as surgery and radiation, swelling may occur in the arm, hand and trunk on the affected side. Lymphedema may occur soon after or years following compromise to the lymph system. Early diagnosis and treatment offer the best outcomes, so awareness of symptoms and taking action are essential.

Ideally, pre-surgical screening is performed to gather baseline information of physical status. This includes a postural assessment, flexibility and strength testing and arm girth measurements. Instruction is provided on suitable exercises to perform before and after surgery, as well as lymphedema precautions and risk reduction.

Following surgery, physiotherapy interventions are directed at minimizing pain, swelling, tissue adhesions and scarring. Impaired function, strength and endurance of the neck, shoulder and trunk muscles are addressed through an individualized exercise program that is progressed as tolerated. A gradual integration of strength and cardiovascular fitness is vital, as maintaining good physical fitness has been shown to reduce cancer recurrence rates.

By following a comprehensive, carefully progressed program, an individual can effectively manage cancer treatment side effects, reduce recovery time, improve functional abilities and alleviate pain and fatigue. Patients gain tools to best care for themselves and are empowered to take an active role in their recovery process.