



Dragon Boating and Breast Cancer

Definitions

- **Breast cancer** is a cancer of breast tissue. Worldwide, it is the most common form of cancer in females, affecting approximately one out of nine to thirteen women at some stage of their life. It is the second most fatal cancer in women after lung cancer. The number of cases has significantly increased since the 1970s, a phenomenon partly blamed on modern lifestyles in the Western world. Since the breast is composed of identical tissues in males and females, breast cancer can also occur in males.
- **Lymphedema**, also known as "Lymphoedema", or "lymphatic obstruction", is a condition of localized fluid retention caused by a compromised lymphatic system. The lymphatic system is often referred to as the body's "second" circulatory system. It collects and filters the tissue fluids in the body. Lymphedema has been barely recognized as being a serious health problem; however, this is changing due to education and awareness. The danger with lymphedema comes from the constant risk of developing an uncontrolled infection in the affected limb.

Exercise, the key to health

- Physical activity affects the production, metabolism and excretion of the female hormones, as well as energy balance, and these factors may be linked to the lower risk of breast cancer in habitually active women.
- Formal exercise programs for women with breast cancer are few and limited to small groups of patients, although the general consensus is that exercise helps to maintain functional capacity in these patients
- Upper body exercise has a role in recovery from breast cancer and lymphedema because it can improve range of motion and reverse muscle atrophy, activate skeletal muscle, stimulate the immune system and reset the lymphatic vessels.

Why dragon boating?

- Dr. Don McKenzie, a sports medicine physician at the University of British Columbia, launched "Abreast In A Boat" in 1996 to test the myth that repetitive upper-body exercise in women treated for breast cancer encourages lymphedema. From a medical study involving one dragon boat crew of 25 women, the Vancouver based organization has grown to include five boats and has inspired many other teams to form across Canada and around the world.
- Dragon boating is a strenuous, repetitive upper body activity that projects a visible message to all people with breast cancer. It is non-weight-bearing and therefore is associated with a lower risk of injury than weight-dependent activities such as running. It uses predominantly upper extremity and trunk muscles, and the improvement in strength has a carry-over effect to day-to-day activity.