

Combined exercise, mindfulness training may help reduce fatigue in cancer survivors

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Researchers in the Exercise, Technology, and Cognition Laboratory have found that a combination of exercise and mindfulness training helps reduce fatigue in breast cancer survivors. Credit: Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and Technology

Researchers at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign have found that a combination of exercise and mindfulness training can help reduce fatigue in breast cancer survivors. The results from their preliminary trials might be useful in designing interventions for other cancer patients.

The study "Acute effects of aerobic exercise and relaxation [training](#) on fatigue in [breast cancer survivors](#): A feasibility trial" was published in *Psycho-Oncology*.

"When it comes to [cancer patients](#), hospitals treat the disease. However, treating the patients is equally important and sometimes that aspect is overlooked," said Jason Cohen, a former graduate student from Sean Mullen's Exercise, Technology, and Cognition Laboratory, which is affiliated with the Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and

Technology. "We wanted to look at improving the quality of life in breast cancer survivors after chemotherapy."

After enduring rigorous [cancer](#) treatments, the survivors often experience mental and physical fatigue, anxiety, and poor sleep. Although other researchers have found that either exercise or relaxation techniques help relieve fatigue, there are very few studies that have tested them in combination. "We wanted to see if there were any added benefits," Cohen said.

The trial took place over seven days, and it included 40 women. The participants were asked to fill out questionnaires about their perceived fatigue levels. They were then divided into three groups where they were asked to either exercise or undergo [mindfulness training](#) or a combination of both.

"We found that initially all the participants had a moderate level of self-reported mental fatigue," Cohen said. "Over the course of the week, the groups that took part in a combination of exercise and mindfulness training reported a drop in [fatigue](#) levels from moderate to mild. The other groups did not show a comparable degree of improvement."

"These findings parallel the ones that my team has collected from other studies involving aerobic [exercise](#) paired with brain training," said Sean Mullen, an associate professor of kinesiology and community health. "Although each of our studies are different in aims, scope and population, our research consistently supports the idea that two health behavior interventions is better than one. Sometimes it is assumed that in merging them together, we end up watering down their unique effects. In our experience, they tend to work just as well, if not better, together."

The researchers hope to use the information from the trial as preliminary data in future grant

applications. In doing so, they hope to increase sample size and trial duration to assess whether the intervention can provide a more robust improvement on quality of life. "When expanding behavioral interventions, the key is not to overwhelm participants with too much new information and to offer sufficient education, training and resources to ensure they stick with the program," Mullen said.

The researchers are continuing to explore opportunities to work with other adult populations with and without chronic disease, using a variety of intervention modalities, to determine if combined treatments are helpful.

More information: Jason Cohen et al, Acute effects of aerobic exercise and relaxation training on fatigue in breast cancer survivors: A feasibility trial, *Psycho-Oncology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/pon.5561](https://doi.org/10.1002/pon.5561)

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