

About you: Care after cancer

Survivorship newsletter

Fall 2025



Ascension



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Cancer Survivorship

The (he)art of cancer survivorship



Dr. Krishna Upadhyaya

Krishna Upadhyaya, MD, FACC, is a board-certified, experienced cardiologist at Ascension Wisconsin in West Allis, Mequon, and Milwaukee. He specializes in diagnosing all types of cardiovascular disease. Dr. Upadhyaya provides preventive cardiology care to manage high blood pressure and cholesterol, heart attack and stroke risk factors, AFib heart rhythm disorders, and congestive heart failure.

Dr. Upadhyaya has a special interest in cardio-oncology, which focuses on addressing the diagnosis and treatment of side effects from chemotherapy on the heart. He collaborates closely with oncologists to help mitigate and prevent cancer therapy-related cardiac dysfunction, in addition to providing a pre-surgical and pre-treatment cardiac evaluation.

In the early 1960s, two different research groups, one in Italy and the other in France, were working on isolating a red pigmented-drug produced by a bacteria, which had cancer fighting properties. The Italian group named it daunomycin, after a pre Roman tribe called the Dauni that used to occupy the area. And the French group named it rubidomycin, after the French word rubis, or ruby, for its color. Because it was discovered at the same time, the groups combined the name into what is now known as daunorubicin. This was the first of a class of common cancer drugs called anthracyclines, and clinic trials in the 60s showed great effectiveness against leukemia and lymphoma. However, a few short years later, it was noted that these patients that were treated with this cancer drug developed congestive heart failure.

Cardio-oncology, is a newer branch of cardiology that focuses on diagnosis, treatment, prevention and surveillance of cancer treatment related effects on the heart. To quote the Journal of the American College of Cardiology, the core tenet of cardio-oncology is to make sure that “the cancer patient of today does not become the heart patient of tomorrow.”¹ There is a significant population of cancer survivors due to the development of effective detection and treatment strategies. In 2016, there were more than 15 million cancer survivors, and that is expected to grow to 20 million by 2026.² This patient group not only faces cardiac disease as a consequence of their treatment, but are also living long enough to reach an age where cardiovascular diseases manifest.

Certain cancer treatments require lifelong monitoring of the heart, even after having achieved cancer remission. The most important class of medication to be aware of is anthracyclines. The specific medications are doxorubicin (colloquially known as the red devil), daunorubicin, epirubicin and idarubicin. Studies in the late 60s and early 70s showed that the higher cumulative dosage patients received of these medications the higher the chance of developing congestive heart failure or weakening of the heart.³ And what is unique about this drug, is that patients can develop the heart failure side effect even years after their treatment has ended.⁴ The highest risk of heart failure is within the first year after anthracycline treatment. The risk goes down significantly after that, but it does not go down to zero.

Therefore, patients should have frequent monitoring in the first year after anthracycline treatment, and then occasional monitoring lifelong. Common signs and symptoms of congestive heart failure include: shortness of breath, difficulty breathing if you lie flat, swelling of your legs, and rapid weight gain. The typical test that is done to evaluate for heart failure is an echocardiogram, or ultrasound of the heart.

The other major cancer treatment to be aware of is radiation. This is specifically radiation to the chest, especially to the left chest. While modern radiation techniques have gotten very good at focusing the radiation to just the cancer area there can be some spillover to the heart. The two main long-term side effects of radiation exposure are valvular heart disease and accelerated coronary artery disease.⁵ Valvular heart disease is a problem with the valves of the heart that normally open and close when the heart is pumping, to prevent blood from going backwards. Radiation exposure can cause the valves to either be tight, so they don't open well, or leaky so they don't close well. These effects can be seen around 5-10 years after radiation treatment. Common signs and symptoms of valve disease can include: shortness of breath, lightheadedness or loss of consciousness, chest pain, leg swelling, and difficulty breathing lying down. An echocardiogram is used to help in the diagnosis of valve diseases. Coronary artery disease is the process of plaque buildup in the vessels that supply blood to the heart. This typically happens as we get older, but it can happen at a faster pace or younger age when you have had radiation exposure to the chest. Common signs and symptoms may include: chest pain, especially with physical activity; reduced exercise tolerance; shortness of breath; and lightheadedness. The typical first test that is done to evaluate for any blockages in the heart blood vessels is a stress test. This should be considered around 5-10 years after radiation treatment.

If you do develop heart failure, there are medications that can help your heart get stronger and keep you living longer. If you develop valve problems, there are procedures to replace or repair valves. And if you develop blockages in your heart blood vessels, there are procedures that can fix them with either stents or in some cases bypass surgery. You should see a cardiologist for these treatments. But how do we try and prevent these long term effects on the heart? The mainstay of treatment is to make sure that your risk factors are well controlled. There are five main risk factors: 1) high blood pressure, 2) diabetes, 3) high cholesterol, 4) sedentary lifestyle, and 5) smoking. Studies have shown that controlling risk factors, helps lower the risk of toxicity to the heart from cancer treatments.⁶ Standard blood pressure guidelines recommend maintaining on average a blood pressure goal of < 140 for the top number and < 90 for the bottom number. For diabetics, the recommended A1c is < 7.0. For cholesterol, if you have had any prior history of heart disease or stroke, the recommended LDL is < 70 mg/dl. For exercise, the recommended amount per the American Heart Association is 150 minutes (2.5 hours) per week.⁷ Studies have shown that exercise during and after cancer treatment result in better long term heart outcomes.⁸ Smoking is always a major cardiovascular risk factor, and efforts to quit should always be made.

When it comes to the art of survivorship, it is important to keep the heart in mind. It is important to know what cancer treatments you have had exposure to so that your doctor knows what conditions to look out for in long term survivorship. In particular, if you've had exposure to or are receiving anthracycline chemotherapy and/or radiation to the chest, talk to your oncologist about whether you should see a cardio-oncologist for further evaluation.

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Time To Eat

The role of plant-based proteins in cancer survivorship



Allie Cantwell

MS, RDN, CD

Allie Cantwell is a registered dietitian with both a bachelor's and master's degree in nutrition from The University of Alabama. She has six years of experience as an RD, including four at Ascension.

Originally from southern Alabama, Allie has lived in several states and now calls Wisconsin home. She currently splits her time between inpatient care and the cancer center, with a growing focus on oncology nutrition. She is passionate about the impact of nutrition in cancer care and finds great fulfillment in supporting patients through their journey.

Often, we hear “eat more plants” and “eat more protein,” but how do we incorporate both into our diet? I am Allie Cantwell, a registered dietitian nutritionist working both with the inpatient population and at our local cancer center. I have been asked more times than I can count, “How do I get protein when I want to follow a more plant-based diet?” As a dietitian, I believe following a more plant-forward diet is the best approach. A plant-forward diet still allows you to consume animal proteins, but the main characters are derived from plants. The first thing we think of when the word ‘protein’ comes to mind: MEAT. Thankfully, there are plenty of non-meat options for protein and they are pretty delicious! Typically, the animal protein is the star of the meal, while plant sources are the sides. This diet flip-flops that, making plants the star of the meal and animal protein the side.

First, let's quickly go over why a plant-forward diet is important in survivorship. A plant-forward diet focuses on the consumption of fruits, vegetables, seeds, legumes, and grains with sprinkles of animal based proteins throughout your meals.

Key benefits from following a plant-forward diet:

1. Phytonutrients: aid with strengthening the immune system and help eliminate waste in the body.
2. Antioxidants: aid with protecting your DNA and limiting the mechanisms that form various diseases within the body.
3. Fiber: beneficial for digestive health, regulates blood sugars, manages cholesterol levels, and aids with maintaining a healthy weight – all beneficial for cancer survivors.
4. All of these things aid with reducing inflammation in the body, in turn allowing your body to be the healthiest it can be.

Second, let's quickly go over why protein is important in survivorship. Protein aids in recovery, builds muscle, regulates hormones, and keeps our cells healthy – key for cancer survivors. Protein seems to be a hot topic in today's world, so I am here to condense all the chatter and help you be the best you. Below is a list of great plant-based protein sources.

Plant-based protein ideas:

1. Hummus: Usually made with black beans, chickpeas or edamame, it is great with pretzels, pita bread and vegetables. They even make dessert hummus (the dark chocolate is the best!) that you can dip fruit in!
2. Whole grains: Quinoa, millet, spelt tend to have a higher protein content, but barley, bulgur, and brown rice also are great sources of protein. Whole grain bread also provides a great amount of protein for two slices. Many of these grains can be sold as flours, as well. You can find all of these options next to the rice and flour sections of the grocery store.
3. Nuts: Peanuts, almonds, pecans, walnuts and pistachios – are also great as nut butters. The best source of complete protein from nuts/seeds is the hemp seed, which you can get hemp as powder to put into smoothies.
4. Nutritional yeast: This can be found at all grocery stores and is best sprinkled on rice or noodles. You can also sprinkle it on popcorn for a cheesy, nutty flavor.
5. Vegetables: Even though there's not much protein in veggies, ½ cup contains 1g to 4g of protein. Green peas, artichokes, spinach, asparagus, Brussels sprouts tend to be higher compared to others.
6. Tofu: My favorite way to cook tofu is letting it marinate in an Asian marinade and then pan frying it with canola or olive oil. You can also add tofu to various soups.
7. Beans/legumes: Edamame and soybeans tend to have a higher protein content, but black beans, pinto beans, chickpeas, lima beans also contain a great amount of protein. Beans are easy to add to soups, salads, and casseroles, etc.

There is such a thing as too much protein, so please consult your local dietitian to get a more individualized protein plan that caters to your needs.

Happy eating!



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Cancer Prevention and Wellness

Staying active after colorectal cancer: what the CHALLENGE trial taught us



Jennifer Minessale

MSN, APNP, AOCNP

Jennifer Minessale is an advanced practice nurse practitioner with Ascension Medical Group. She is board-certified in the care of adult patients as an Advanced Oncology Certified Nurse Practitioner (AOCNP). She completed the City of Hope's Cancer Genomics Intensive course.

Jennifer strives to empower patients and their families to become advocates in their own healthcare by educating the individual and family on their cancer risks, lifestyle factors that affect development of cancer, and genetic risk factors. She individualizes care for each patient based upon their particular cancer risk factors and goals.

For colorectal cancer survivors, the journey doesn't end with treatment. Maintaining health and reducing the risk of recurrence are top priorities — and new research shows that physical activity may play a critical role.

The CHALLENGE (Colon Health and Life-Long Exercise Change) clinical trial was a large international study that examined whether a structured exercise program could improve outcomes for colon cancer survivors. Specifically, the trial looked at survivors of stage II and III colon cancer who had completed chemotherapy within the past two to six months.

Participants were randomly assigned to either a three-year structured physical activity program or standard follow-up care. The exercise group received coaching and support to achieve 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity per week, such as brisk walking or cycling.

The results of the clinical trial were disclosed at the 2025 American Society of Clinical Oncology conference, and were very promising. Survivors in the exercise group had a modest, but meaningful, improvement in disease-free survival compared to those in standard care. While the trial did not find a statistically significant reduction in cancer recurrence, it showed that long-term, regular physical activity is safe, achievable, and beneficial for overall health and well-being.



*Scan QR code to visit
our Cancer Prevention
& Wellness site*

Beyond potential improvements in survival, participants who exercised reported better quality of life, reduced fatigue, and improved cardiovascular fitness — important benefits for anyone recovering from cancer.

Structured exercise programs: tailored to your needs

The CHALLENGE Trial highlights how structured, consistent exercise can provide substantial benefits, but it also underscores the importance of customizing exercise plans. Survivors should consider their current physical abilities, treatment side effects, and personal preferences when developing a fitness program. For example, strength training can help rebuild muscle mass lost during treatment, while aerobic exercises such as brisk walking or cycling improve cardiovascular health and energy levels.

Additionally, flexibility exercises like yoga or stretching routines can address joint stiffness and improve mobility, while balance exercises help prevent falls — an important consideration for survivors who may have had surgery or experience neuropathy from chemotherapy. Ultimately, survivors should aim to gradually incorporate a combination of these exercise types into their routine, starting with manageable goals and progressing as their strength and endurance improve. Working with healthcare providers, physical therapists, or fitness experts familiar with cancer recovery can ensure the program remains safe, effective, and enjoyable.

What does this mean for survivors?

Even moderate physical activity, when done consistently, can support recovery and long-term health after colorectal cancer. Talk to your healthcare team about starting an exercise plan that's right for you. Whether it's walking, swimming, or dancing — moving more can make a real difference.

Have a question?
We invite you to submit your questions by scanning the QR code.



Ascension Wisconsin's Cancer Survivorship Program offers a free 10-week healthy eating active living (HEAL) program for any female cancer survivors. Through this program, cancer survivors and caregivers will receive personalized exercise programming and nutrition planning. The next HEAL in-person program is 4:30-6 p.m., Monday, Jan. 5, 2026, at the New Berlin YMCA.

Contact Kayla Kalbacken(Thorne), Cancer Survivorship Nurse Coordinator, at kayla.kalbacken@ascension.org or 414-212-5171 if you are interested in participating.

Poster presented at ASCO 43, 2025 (suppl 17; abstr LBA3510)

NEW cancer survivorship wellness at home

About the series

Emerging research highlights the positive impact of mind-body-spirit wellness on quality of life, emphasizing the importance of physical activity, healthy eating, emotional resilience, and spiritual well-being. This free, virtual - only program is open to all cancer survivors — whether newly diagnosed, currently in treatment, or post-treatment — as well as their support individuals.

Session offerings

- **Spiritual classes**
- **Nutritional classes**
 - Portion Control and My Plate Guidelines
 - Debunking Nutrition Myths and Fads
 - Healthy for the Holidays
 - Tips On Preparing Healthful Foods For One or Two Persons
 - Healthy Eating on a Budget
 - Nutrition Label Reading
 - Navigating the Grocery Store
- **Exercise /Basic Barre classes**
- **Yoga and Breathwork classes**
 - Gentle Flow & Stretch
 - Yin/Restorative/Nidra
 - Balance and Alignment
 - Breathwork
 - Chair Yoga



Registration

Virtual sessions begin in September and are offered at various times and days of the week. **Registration is required.** Participants may register for as many classes as they wish.



Scan the above QR code for more information or to register on [Ascension WI Survivorship Website](#).

Within The Community

Support groups and programs

Racine

- **Multiple Myeloma Support Group (Hybrid)**
Meets the second Monday of each month from 6:30-8 p.m. in the Cancer Center Conference Room at Ascension All Saints Hospital. *For more information, contact Sarah Jurkiewicz sewi@IMFsupport.org.*
- **Prostate Cancer Support Group (In person)**
Meets the fourth Tuesday of each month from 5:30-7 p.m. in the Cancer Center Conference Room at Ascension All Saints Hospital. No Meeting in July or December. *For more information, contact Annette Matera 262-687-8597 or annette.matera@ascension.org.*
- **Fit To Fight (In person)**
A exercise program for patients currently undergoing cancer treatment, or cancer survivors who have recently completed treatments in our Ascension Wisconsin Cancer Care Centers. Classes are twice weekly. Patients receiving care through the Ascension Wisconsin Cancer Center may qualify for a scholarship: Includes a three-month membership for the cancer patient and one support person. *For more information or to register, call 262-687-4377.*
- **Smoking Cessation Support Group Program (In person)** A free smoking cessation support group program open to all adult Ascension patients. The program consists of six weekly, in-person, group support sessions. Support group meets every Thursday starting Oct. 2-Nov. 6 from 4-5 p.m. at Ascension All Saints Cancer Center in the first floor conference room. Registration is required. Scan the QR code to the right to learn more or to register.

Fox Valley

- **The Cancer Support Group (In person)**
Patients and their support persons may attend this support group at Ascension St. Elizabeth in the Helen Fowler Board Room. This support group meets the first Monday of each month from 6-7 p.m. No meeting in July or December. *For more information, contact Heather.Roesch@ascension.org or carrie.olm@ascension.org.*
- **A Time To Heal (In person)**
A FREE 9-week program designed to help cancer survivors of any cancer diagnosis regain their physical, emotional, and spiritual health after cancer treatment. During this program, you will work with trained facilitators and meet others who understand your journey. These weekly sessions provide evidence-based advice on topics including nutrition, exercise, building resilience, and moving forward in the face of fear. Next session starts Sept. 17 at Festival Foods in Neenah, on Wednesdays, from 2:30-4 p.m. *For more information, visit Ascension Wisconsin Cancer Survivorship webpage or contact kayla.thorne@ascension.org.*

To learn more or to register for Ascension Wisconsin's Smoking Cessation Support Group Program, scan the QR code.



Within The Community

Support groups and programs

Milwaukee

- **Breast Cancer Support Group (In person)**
Meets the second Thursday of each month from noon to 1 p.m. in the radiation oncology department, garden level. *For more information, contact Paula Weckman at paula.weckman@ascension.org or 414-206-3966.*
- **General Cancer Support Group (In person)**
Meets the fourth Monday of the month from noon to 1 p.m. in the Radiation Oncology Department, garden level. *For more information, contact Beth Garbe at elizabeth.garbe@ascension.org or 414-585-1548.*

Wauwatosa/Elmbrook/Franklin

- **Journey to Wellness (In person)**
Meets the first Wednesday of each month from 10-11 a.m. at the Chapel of Reiman Cancer Center. *For more information, contact biannca.kramer@ascension.org.*
- **Healthy Eating Active Living Program (In person)**
A free program for female cancer survivors ages 19-80 years old. Next programs starts Jan. 5 at the New Berlin YMCA from 4:30-6 p.m. *For more information, contact Kayla Kalbacken(Thorne) at kayla.thorne@ascension.org or 414-212-5171.*

- **Coping with Cancer Support Group (In person)**
Meets the third Tuesday of each month from noon to 1 p.m. in the first floor lobby conference room. *For more information, contact Amanda Hanson 262-780-4255 or amanda.hanson1@ascension.org.*
- **Prostate Support Group (In person)**
Meets the fourth Tuesday of each month from 5:30-7 p.m. in the fifth floor Conference Room 5B.No Meeting in July or December. *For more information, contact Leanne Walz leanne.walz@ascension.org.*
- **Ostomy Support Group (In person)**
Meets the first Thursday of each month from 10-11 a.m in the fifth floor conference room A/B. For those who have a colostomy, ileostomy, urostomy or are anticipating ostomy surgery. Please RSVP by Monday the week of the meeting to Ashley Szmanda. For more information, contact Ashley Szmanda 414-447-2146 or ashley.szmanda@ascension.org.
- **Yoga Connection - SE Mayfair Road (In person)**
Eight-week yoga class that is designed for cancer survivors at any stage, and if desired, a support person. The yoga sessions include: gentle stretching, low impact and restorative poses, relaxation techniques and guided meditation and breathwork. Registration is required. *For more information, contact Leanne Walz at 414-256-1955 or Amanda Hanson at 262-780-4255.*

Within The Community

Support groups and programs

Virtual Offerings

- **Pre-recorded Head and Neck Cancer Educational Series**

A comprehensive virtual pre-recorded educational series for individuals diagnosed with head and neck cancers. The topics are adapted to address the specific need of cancer patients/survivors with head and neck cancers. Topics include:

- Nutrition, including information on feeding tube challenges
- Speech, dental and oral care
- Lymphedema
- Smoking Implications and Cessation Tips
- Late and Long-term Side Effects



- **Pre-recorded Nutritional Series For Cancer Survivors**

An educational series right from the comfort of your home at your own convenience. We will clear up all the confusion on what your plate should look like at every meal, including snacks. We want to help you understand how to better take care of your health and prevent cancer - recurrence by eating healthful foods. We will keep it simple and even show you how! Cooking demonstrations with recipes and grocery lists will be included in every class. Our four-class series focuses on a different meal each class — breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks.

Visit [Ascension WI Survivorship Website](#) for more information or to register for either program.

