In the battle against breast cancer, there’s one self-defense tool that every woman should be wielding. Exercise. And with the direct national cost for breast cancer care in the United States at $16.5 billion yearly, we need to be instituting public policies and community strategies that help ensure that she can.

An increasing body of research shows that exercise may be one of the best shields against breast cancer that a woman can have in her health care arsenal.

Dozens of studies show that physically active women have a lower risk of developing breast cancer than inactive women. And according to the National Cancer Institute (NCI), existing evidence shows a decreasing risk of breast cancer as the frequency and duration of physical activity increase. Most studies suggest, NCI states, that 30 to 60 minutes per day of moderate - to high-intensity physical activity is associated with a reduction in breast cancer risk.

Studies also show that physical activity after a breast cancer diagnosis may reduce the risk of death from the disease. A recent report by Macmillan Cancer Support found that breast cancer patients’ risk of recurrence and of dying from breast cancer can be reduced by up to 40 percent by doing 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity a week.

The report also found that after treatment, all cancer patients can reduce their risk of getting side effects of cancer and its treatment—such as fatigue, depression, osteoporosis, and heart disease — by doing the same 150 minutes of physical activity.

Undoubtedly, breast cancer can affect any woman at any time — and without any identifiable reason as to why. And certainly, there are breast cancer risks that a woman simply cannot change. But with so much evidence in favor of exercise as a potential defense against breast cancer — and against other cancers and costly chronic diseases — we need to incorporate the argument for exercise into the battle cry.

Exercise is one of the most effective forms of primary prevention we have. The practice of primary prevention — engaging in beneficial lifestyle behaviors, such as regular exercise, healthy eating, avoidance of tobacco and other controlled substances, stress management, and routine medical exams in order to deter the onset of disease — boosts our health and puts us in a better position for fighting off illnesses, like breast cancer, when they do strike.

For exercise and primary prevention to really take hold, we need to create physical living and work environments, public policies, and a national culture that support healthy lifestyles. In short, we need to restructure our society so the healthier choice becomes the easier choice for everyone.

After all, if our culture, physical environment, government policies, and approach to healthcare work against exercise and other forms of primary prevention, the chances are that...
one of the best defenses a woman has against breast cancer — and against many other
diseases — will be left unused, and for all practicality, outside her reach.

Fighting disease starts with building health long before illness strikes. In the battle against
breast cancer — and against virtually every other disease — we must remove the barriers to
exercise and other forms of primary prevention so we can start at a place of wellness.

That means public policies and legislation that enable national, state, and local
infrastructures that support healthy lifestyles; changes in the tax code that remove barriers to
workplace wellness; a reconfiguration of the health care system and the way in which the
medical profession is trained so prevention comes first; a reversal of the way we have
removed exercise from the lives of our children and replaced it with poor food options easily
available in schools and strategically marketed through the mass media. And that’s just for
starters.

Exercise really is a considerable deterrent against breast cancer, and an equally considerable
ally when battling the disease. All told, exercise is a highly effective tool in building health
and one that should not be left unused.

It’s time we came together — as citizens, policy makers, legislators, educators, engineers,
doctors, insurance professionals, public health workers, parents, and families — to make
sure that exercise is a resource to which every American has easy access.

It’s time we reconfigured our society to be a healthy society — one in which the choice for
exercise and the practice of primary prevention becomes the norm. It’s from this healthy
launching point that the battle against breast cancer — and against every other life-
threatening illnesses — should start.

© Helen Durkin. Reprinted by permission of the author. 1510L