

# UW Health: Occupational therapy critical for breast cancer patients' recovery

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MADISON, Wis. – A breast cancer diagnosis can bring radiation, chemotherapy and surgery to the forefront of a patient's mind, but one important part of treatment that not everyone thinks about is occupational therapy.

Far from simply care that enables a person to do a job, occupational therapy for breast cancer patients at UW Health combines physical, psychosocial and cognitive therapy to enable patients to get back to the active lifestyle they want to lead, according to Mary Drumm, occupational therapist, UW Health.

"We offer exercises, including ones to do at home, and range of motion tests," Drumm said. "We're there to encourage our patients to overcome challenges and meet their goals."

Amanda Walsh, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in November 2021, said before her diagnosis, occupational therapy was not on her radar at all.

"I probably couldn't have told you what it was," she said. "But now that I've had it, I can't imagine going through cancer treatments without it."

Walsh had a double mastectomy in January 2022 and the next day she was introduced to an inpatient occupational therapist who measured her baseline range of motion – which helps create goals for a wider range of motion – and walked her through some initial at-home exercises. Walsh started occupational therapy appointments with Drumm a few weeks later.

Walsh underwent a sentinel lymph node biopsy as part of her double mastectomy,

which revealed that cancer had spread to her lymph nodes. In June 2022, she had the remaining lymph nodes under her right arm removed, triggering lymphedema. Lymphedema is a swelling of the tissue that prevents lymph fluid from circulating through the lymphatic system – a system that maintains fluid levels in the body and protects the body from infection, among other things – and it most commonly occurs when lymph nodes are removed or damaged due to cancer treatment.

Drumm helps Walsh manage the lymphedema with exercises as well as wraps and compression tools.

“We are here to help patients understand how their symptoms can affect what they want to do,” Drumm said. “Every patient’s needs are different, and every patient’s goals are different.”

Walsh is grateful for her cancer care team, including their quick work to connect her with occupational therapy. She hopes everyone who undergoes surgery for something like breast cancer gets the same opportunity, she said.

“Ask your doctor about it,” she said. “It helps you not only physically, but mentally and emotionally, to maintain agency in your life and do what you love to do, whatever that is.”

Interviews and B-roll with Walsh and Drumm are available.