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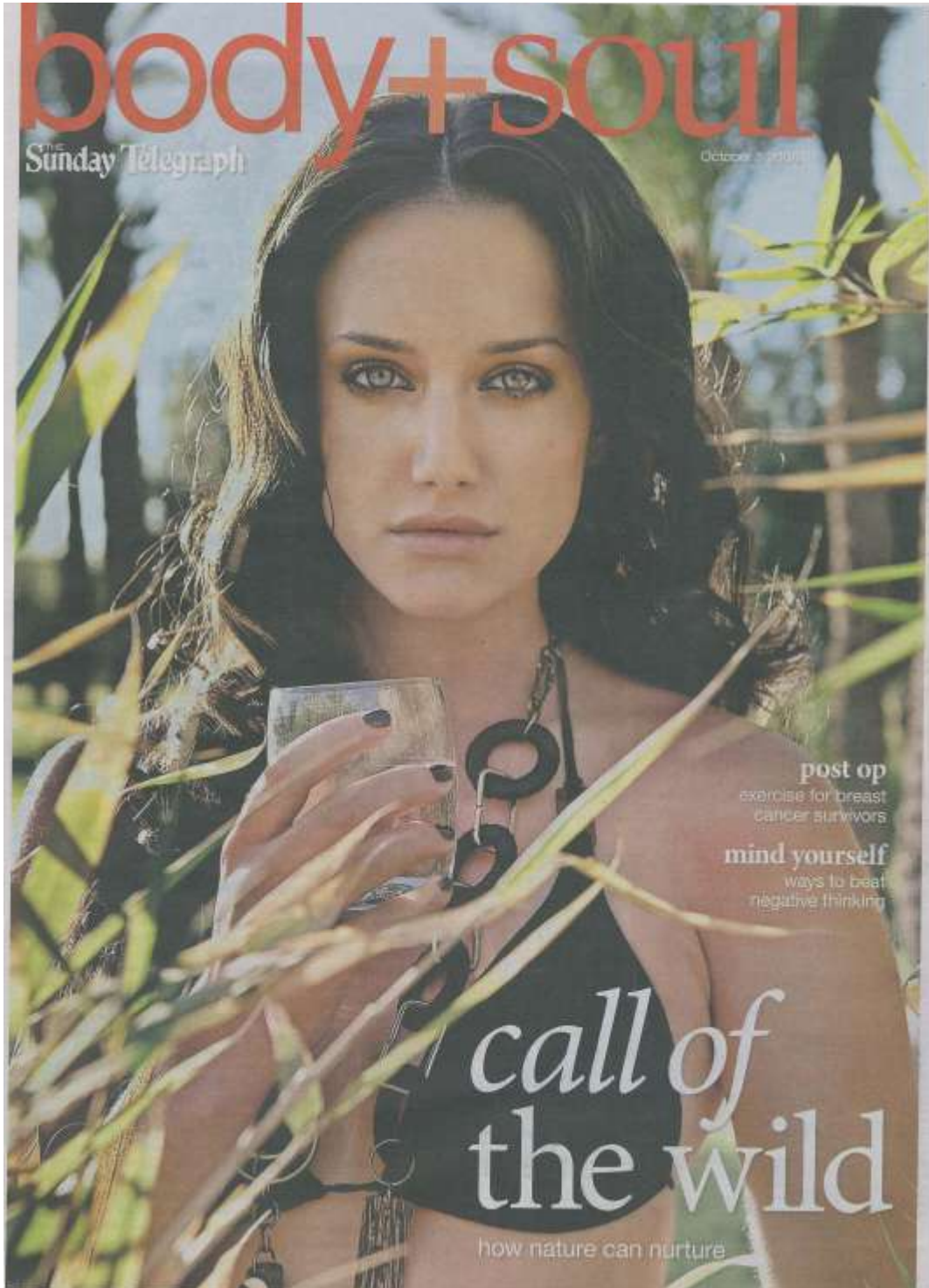
Body & Soul (Daily Telegraph)

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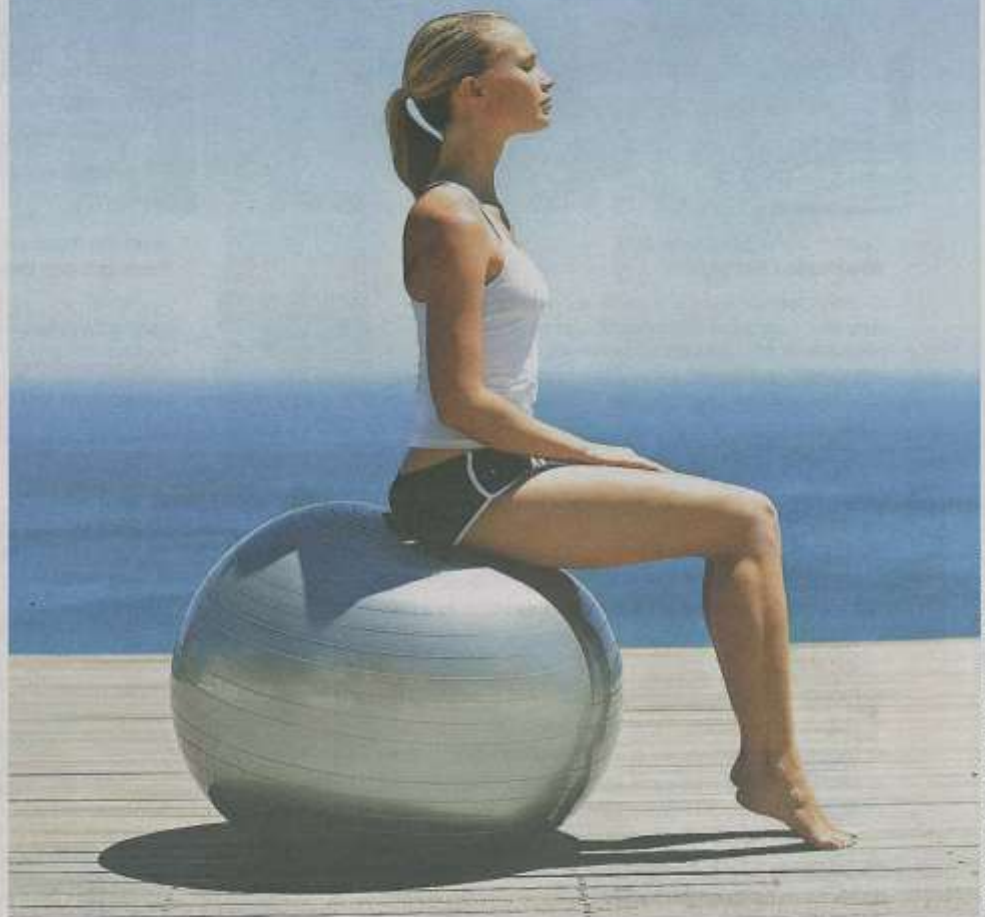
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Fighting fit

For breast cancer survivors, a prescription of regular exercise can be the best medicine. By Linda Drummond.



PHOTOGRAPHY: PHOTOLAB (SETT); BETTY HANES/PHOTODISC, TRUMPET

When it comes to easing back into life after recovering from breast cancer, gentle exercise can be a survivor's best friend. Breast cancer survivors have traditionally had little guidance when it comes to exercising once their physiotherapy ends. However, initiatives such as Breast Cancer Awareness Month have helped ensure that research into breast cancer has many branches and an increasing number of studies are finding that gentle exercise can help survivors heal and thrive.

The Breast Cancer Network Australia recommends mild to moderate exercise such as walking, which can improve energy levels, fitness and body image and help reduce stress. Walking is the most accessible form of exercise and is suitable for any level of fitness. But if you'd like to try something more specific, there are specialised exercise programs.

Doreen Puglisi, an exercise physiologist and breast cancer survivor, developed the Pink Ribbon Program, which uses Pilates to rehabilitate breast cancer survivors, when she found there was no specific program to bridge the gap between surgery and recovery. "I began the program in 2002 and two

years later was diagnosed with breast cancer," Puglisi explains. "I used the program to rehabilitate myself and it was through my own experience that I realised its importance and benefits."

While traditionally breast cancer survivors have tended to rest following surgery and treatment, it has now been found that gentle, regular exercise has a number of benefits. "Exercising during and following breast cancer treatment improves self-confidence,

helps regain strength and mobility in affected shoulder and arm areas, enhances energy levels and helps to control weight, improves sleep and alleviates fatigue, decreases stress and enhances physical and mental wellbeing," Puglisi says.

Mary Macheras-Magias manages the Encore program in Melbourne, an eight-week program designed specifically for women who have undergone breast cancer treatment. Macheras-Magias was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1998 and started with the program as a participant in 2000. She says regular exercise has made a positive impact on her recovery. "I walk regularly and exercise a few times a week," she says.

Before attempting any exercise program, you should seek guidance from your physician. "The rate of recovery is different for each individual. How soon a woman can start

“Exercise improves strength and enhances physical and mental wellbeing.”

exercising will depend on the type of surgery, reconstruction and reaction to treatments such as radiation and chemotherapy," Puglisi says.

Puglisi believes that Pilates and breast cancer rehabilitation are the perfect fit. "Pilates originated as a rehabilitation program. Based on its principles of proper alignment, stabilisation, correct posture and improving flexibility and full range of motion without stressing the joints, I believed it was a perfect fit for rehabilitating breast cancer patients."

Easy does it

"We have some evidence that exercise can help stimulate some of the cells in the immune system and help repair some of the damage done by chemotherapy," says Andrea Mastro, a professor of microbiology and cell biology at Pennsylvania State University in the US, who released the results of her study in 2005.

Improving a woman's range of motion in the arms and shoulders can lead to a better quality of life, and may also inhibit the development of lymphedema, localised fluid retention which may develop after the removal of the lymph nodes. "Gentle exercise can help the lymph system drain properly," says Puglisi. "When muscles perform moderate movement, they massage the lymph vessels. This helps them move fluid more efficiently."

Dragon boating is another popular form of exercise for survivors. Dragons Abreast is

celebrating its 10-year anniversary this year and has over 1500 members in Australia. Founder Michelle Hanton says: "At the end of your cancer treatment you're cut loose. With Dragons Abreast, you're with other women who've been through the same thing."

Hanton adds that although Dragons Abreast is not a support group, women find the emotional, physical and social elements appealing. "With any other activity, if you can't keep up you're left behind. But with dragon boating, you can have a rest and join in when you feel able. It's a gradual build-up and each individual works to their own level."

Regular exercise and healthy eating have the added benefits of weight loss, which researchers have long hypothesised could lead to better outcomes after breast cancer diagnosis. "We

know that women who are overweight at the time of breast cancer diagnosis have a higher risk of recurrence than lean women, but the reasons for this have not been clear," says Dr Jennifer Ligibel, of the Breast Oncology Center at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, US. But her study last year found that exercise reduced insulin levels in previously sedentary breast cancer survivors' blood.

A recent study published in the Journal Of Clinical Oncology found that breast cancer survivors who ate a healthy diet and walked briskly for 30 minutes a day, six days a week, reduced their mortality risk by 50 per cent.

Only you and your doctor can decide what is right for you, but there's no doubt that exercise can be one of the most positive ways to take your health into your own hands.

Back in action

When you decide to start exercise after recovering from breast cancer treatment you should look out for the following:

- The go-ahead from your doctor.
- A supportive environment – somewhere where you'll feel comfortable to exercise in a scarf or hat, or bare-headed, if you're recovering from losing your hair during treatment.

- A trainer who recognises the issues you'll face as a breast cancer survivor, particularly the limitations on your body.

- Drink water before you exercise, and have a good drink when you finish as it's easy to become dehydrated after cancer treatment.

- Listen to your body and rest when you become tired.

Positive programs

• Pink Ribbon Program

Whenever you buy a specially marked Mount Franklin product from Caltex stores, you'll receive a free dvd. For information on the program visit www.pinkribbonprogram.com

• Dragons Abreast

Dragons Abreast is holding a regatta on October 19 in Sydney. For more information or to find a club near you visit www.dragonsabreast.com.au or call 1300 889 566.

• Encore

Encore is a free floor- and pool-based exercise program in Melbourne designed specifically for women who have had surgery for breast cancer. Provided by the YWCA in a supportive, non-medical environment, the program will help restore mobility, flexibility and confidence. Call 1800 305 150 for more details.

For more information on the Breast Cancer Network Australia visit www.bcna.org.au