Introduction
In September 2009, BCNA surveyed members of our Review & Survey Group\(^1\) about their exercise behaviour.

We asked women to tell us whether or not they exercised, the types of exercise activities they undertake, how often they exercise, why they exercise, and the challenges and benefits they find in exercising regularly.

We received completed surveys from 92 women. Two thirds were from metropolitan areas of Australia, with the remainder from regional and rural areas. All states and territories were represented.

There was a diversity of age groups represented, as indicated in the graph below. We received no responses from women aged 30 or under, or over 80.

![Age of Respondents Graph]

There was also diversity in the length of time since initial diagnosis, with most women diagnosed between two and ten years ago. Four respondents had been diagnosed in the last 12 months, and 3 respondents more than 15 years ago.

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\(^1\) BCNA’s Review & Survey Group comprises BCNA members who have had breast cancer and who have agreed to join our email mailing list to review resources and complete surveys for us from time to time. To find out more or to join, visit [www.bcna.org.au](http://www.bcna.org.au) > Policy and advocacy > Seat at the Table > Get involved.
Survey Results

More than 60 per cent of women said they participated in regular, organised exercise activity. The top four activities were gym sessions (60%), Pilates (24%), golf (15%) and the YWCA’s Encore program (15%). Other activities included yoga, dragon boating, and tai chi.

‘The Encore Program was not only great for exercise but for meeting a great group of people who have become friends.’

‘Dragons Abreast is fantastic. It is a fun sport and it provides companionship with women who “have been there”.’

Nearly 98 per cent of women said they participate in casual types of exercise, with walking (99%), gardening (59%), cycling (23%) and swimming (20%) the most popular.2

‘After my diagnosis and between my surgeries, I found walking was almost meditative. It cleared my mind and gave me a chance to plan my day.’

‘During treatment I found hydrotherapy and tai chi the most achievable forms of exercise.’

‘I found that with my stretching Pilates DVD I was able to do some form of exercise at anytime of the day or night (when I wasn’t sleeping very well).’

Only four of the 92 women who completed the survey said they do not currently exercise. Two said exercise causes them pain, one said she doesn’t have an exercise companion and doesn’t like to exercise on her own, and one was recovering from foot surgery (not related to her breast cancer).

‘Chemotherapy has left me with ongoing health issues that impede my ability to exercise - brittle bones, muscular aches and pains.’

The women who do exercise said they exercise regularly. More than 90 per cent exercised for between 30 minutes and one hour per session.

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2 Respondents could choose more than one response to this question.
Women’s reasons for exercising were varied, but the majority indicated they exercise because they feel they ought to.\(^3\)

**Why do you exercise?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Number of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have always exercised</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy exercise</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel I should exercise</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My doctor told me to exercise</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A friend/friends encourage me to exercise</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

'I don't enjoy it so much. I just know I need to do it and I feel better afterwards.'

'My doctor always emphasises the need for exercise and that is the best motivation available to me.'

The benefits of exercise were also varied, although nearly all women said it improved their overall sense of wellbeing.\(^4\)

**What are the benefits you find in exercising?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>Number of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improves sense of wellbeing</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight loss</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher energy levels</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced fatigue</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better sleep</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps to manage depression</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps to improve mood</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps to manage side-effects</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to socialise with others</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^3\) Respondents could choose more than one response to this question.

\(^4\) Respondents could choose more than one response to this question.
‘I enjoy exercise for the sense of wellbeing it engenders. The discipline necessary to exercise often is ‘character building’!! There is a buzz that accompanies making the effort.’

‘Exercising throughout my chemo and radiation treatments was very beneficial - I felt much better and had more energy.’

‘I absolutely hated the thought of doing a weight bearing gym class, but the benefits from just one hour a week are fabulous. I am stronger in my arms, especially the affected side.’

Finding time to exercise was the main challenge for women, with 60 per cent of respondents giving this answer. Other challenges were feeling too tired to exercise (27%), and finding a form of exercise to suit (20%). More than 22 per cent of women said they found no challenges in exercising.\(^5\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Number of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No challenges</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding time</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding a form that is right for me</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding an exercise companion</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too tired</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too unwell</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t enjoy it</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel pressured to exercise</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Fatigue sometimes prevents me doing what I would really like to do.’

‘Motivation (is a challenge).’

‘Even when I was having chemotherapy and not feeling very well, I tried to walk nearly every day. My husband would drive me somewhere where it was flat and we would walk for 20 to 30 minutes.’

\(^5\) Respondents could choose more than one response to this question.
Conclusion

Increasingly we are hearing more and more about the value of exercise for both physical and emotional wellbeing. Researchers tell us that regular exercise during and following breast cancer treatment can provide a range of health benefits.

We know, for example, that women who are active tend to have better body image and higher self-esteem. Studies have shown that regular exercise can also be beneficial in managing the side-effects of breast cancer treatment, including reducing nausea, fatigue and pain.⁶

While we were thrilled to find that nearly all our survey respondents do some kind of regular exercise, we know that many women with breast cancer find it difficult to exercise during their treatment, and that many women exercise less after breast cancer treatment than they did before their diagnosis.

Research by Exercise Physiologist Dr Sandi Hayes, of the Queensland University of Technology’s Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation, found that more than 54 per cent of a group of 277 women with breast cancer were insufficiently active 12 months after their treatment.

Dr Hayes’ research shows a number of reasons why women don’t exercise during and after their treatment:

- Women are receiving mixed advice regarding exercise, diet and weight
- Clinical concerns, eg fatigue and lymphoedema
- Concerns of support people, who may be fearful about women doing too much
- Personal reasons – not sure what to do, fears
- Usual issues – time, it’s boring, it’s too hot or too rainy
- Breast cancer specific issues – wig makes head too hot, can’t wear a bra, arm restricted from compression garment.

Our own research shows that finding time to exercise was the main challenge for our respondents, along with overcoming fatigue and finding a form of exercise with which women feel comfortable.

Our research also indicates that some women may not understand the benefits of regular exercise in managing the side-effects of breast cancer treatment. Exercise can help to reduce fatigue, nausea, pain, anxiety, stress and depression.

BCNA’s Exercise Survey has been used to inform the Summer 2009 edition of The Beacon magazine. We will continue to look for ways to inform women about the particular benefits of exercise for women with breast cancer.

‘It should be something that gets talked about at some stage of the treatment journey, as it is an adjunct to treatment and beyond.’

⁶ Dr Sandi Hayes, QUT Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation
Useful Tips and Resources

We asked women for their tips on exercise. Some of the suggestions included:

- Exercise with a friend – it gives you added motivation and companionship
- Find a good bra, especially if you wear a prosthesis
- Ask your physiotherapist or doctor for some suitable exercises you can do at home
- See a personal trainer who can tailor exercises to suit you (although this can be an expensive option).

We also asked women to let us know about exercise programs they found useful:

- The YWCA Encore hydrotherapy program
  - An exercise program specifically designed for women undergoing breast cancer treatment
  - Operates nationally across all states and territories
  - Phone 1800 305 150 (freecall) for your nearest Encore program
  - Email: encore@ywcaencore.org.au
  - www.ywcaencore.org.au

- Living Longer Living Stronger (Tas, Vic, WA, SA)
  - A customised and tailored strength-building gym program for over-50s
  - Operated by Councils of the Ageing (www.cota.org.au) in the following states:
    - Tasmania
      - Phone: (03) 6228 1897
      - www.cotatas.org > Programs
    - Victoria
      - Phone: (03) 9654 4443
      - www.cotavic.org.au > Healthy & active ageing
    - Western Australia
      - Phone: (08) 9321 2133
      - www.cotawa.asn.au > Living Longer, Living Stronger
    - South Australia – COTA SA operates the Strength for Life program, strength training sessions for people over 50
      - Phone: (08) 8232 0422
      - www.seniorsvoice.org.au > Programs > Physical Activity > Strength for Life

- Dragons Abreast Australia
  - A national organisation of breast cancer survivors who participate in dragon boating
  - Phone 1300 889 566 for your nearest Dragons Abreast group
  - www.dragonsabreast.com.au

- BreaCan Feel Good Gentle Exercise Program (Vic)
  - Located in the Melbourne CBD
  - Gentle exercise program to tone the body and help the lymphatic system
  - Phone 1300 781 500
  - www.breacan.org.au

- Kim Walters Choices Program (Qld)
  - Located at the Wesley Hospital in Brisbane
  - Choices runs a number of support groups, including exercise groups, for women with breast cancer
  - Phone 1800 227 271 (freecall)
The University of Queensland (Qld)
  o UQ runs rehabilitation and exercise programs for older adults at its St Lucia and Ipswich campuses
  o Phone: (07) 3346 3241
  o Email: clinics@uqs.com.au
  o www.uqsport.com.au > Exercise therapy programs > Group exercise programs for the older adult

Many local gyms offer personalised programs to suit individual needs. Make sure you ask for a qualified personal trainer to assess your level of fitness and draw up a suitable exercise program for you.