

## Breast cancer patients find it helps to move around

Treatment side effects subside through dance

by Meghan Tierney | Staff Writer

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At Adventist Rehabilitation Hospital of Maryland, women suffering from chronic pain are moving toward healthier bodies and minds with the help of bubbles, boas and bands of yellow stretchy rubber.

The Rockville hospital, Montgomery General Hospital in Olney and Baltimore Washington Medical Center in Glen Burnie are the three hospitals in the state to offer classes in the Lebed Method, a light dance-inspired physical therapy regimen. The therapy is used by those whose movements are limited by lymphedema, a chronic and incurable condition common among breast cancer patients that causes swelling in the limbs and elsewhere in the body. The classes have also become something of a social phenomenon in places such as Washington, where they are offered in 65 different hospitals, community centers and churches, according to Focus on Healing Inc., the non-profit that owns the rights to the therapy.

“It brings fun and silliness. It makes people forget about their fears and concerns for an hour a week,” said occupational therapist Vicki Ralph, a certified Lebed instructor who recommends that her lymphedema patients attend Adventist classes to supplement regular treatments, which involve massage and compression of the affected limbs. Attendance at the weekly class has more than doubled since she began teaching it in the fall, and the five original students remain among the 12 currently enrolled.

Participants use props to aid them in light stretching and gentle movements, such as raising and lowering a feather boa and blowing soap bubbles to help with breathing. The exercises can be done sitting or standing, and can be beneficial for people with chronic fatigue, multiple sclerosis, arthritis or other conditions that make movement difficult, Ralph said. “It’s activity, but it’s not too strenuous,” said Susie Sabatano, 36, of Silver Spring, who was diagnosed with breast cancer when she was 28 and developed lymphedema a year later. She found out about the class last fall from Ralph, an acquaintance she met through church. “It’s not like an aerobics class where you’re trying to get your heart rate up,” she said.



Exercise is recommended for people with lymphedema, a condition in which the lymphatic fluids that help the body fight infection build up in the limbs or elsewhere, because it moves accumulated fluid out of swollen areas, according

“It puts you in a good mood and gives you energy that you didn’t have before,” said LaQuita Huntzman, 66, of Germantown, who was unable to lift her left arm above her head until she began the exercises. She has worn a custom-made compression bandage extending from her hand to her elbow 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the last six years to reduce the swelling.

Huntzman, a breast cancer survivor, developed lymphedema after she had 26 lymph nodes removed in 2001. Breast cancer often first spreads to the lymph nodes near the armpits, according to the nonprofit [breastcancer.org](http://breastcancer.org).

The Lebed Method was developed in 2000 by Sherry Lebed Davis, a professional dancer who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1996. The Adventist classes, which also serve as a kind of support group, feature music such as “(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman” and “I Believe I Can Fly” and plenty of water breaks for socializing.

“You start talking about your cancer and then you start talking about where your family lives,” said Huntzman, who exercises at home and plays the piano for an hour a day to keep her fingers moving.

Ralph agreed. “Some people don’t connect with a support group,” she said. “This is more upbeat.”