

Breast cancer patients expect treatment to be difficult. What they don't anticipate are newfound physical challenges that accompany their recovery.

In 2013, the U.S. saw a 90.5 percent survival rate for patients five years after breast cancer diagnosis. However, survivors often struggle with pain in their arms and shoulders or limbs that swell to twice their original size. Professor Mary Fisher wanted to know why this happened — then she helped find solutions to alleviate it.

Fisher joined a National Institutes of Health team working to promote prospective surveillance — monitoring patients to observe pattern development — and early intervention efforts to improve survivors' physical capabilities and prevent long-term functional limitations. With early cancer detection and targeted exercise, she says, survivors show improvement.

The research represents a paradigm shift in addressing the needs of breast cancer survivors after treatment — a change Fisher says will improve the quality of life for women long after they've overcome cancer.