

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE

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Rowing over the swells

ROWING A GO? Could rowing prevent side effect of breast cancer surgery?

Next weekend's Head of the Charles is more than just a top rowing event for surgical oncologist Carolyn Kaelin- it's also the site of her next research project. Kaelin, inspired by a rower who shows no sign of a common side effect of breast cancer surgery after four lumpectomies and one mastectomy, has launched a nationwide study to find out if intense physical exercise may actually prevent the onset of the side effect, known as secondary lymphedema. The nonfatal but incurable condition, which can cause swelling, numbing, and infection of arms or hands, affects over 250,000 women nationwide according to the National Lymphedema Network.

Kaelin said that it had been widely believed that repetitive upper-body exercise by breast cancer survivors would lead to lymphedema.

Rowing has always been at the top of the list of 'don'ts for women who just had breast cancer surgery," said Kaelin, who was rower Diane Cotting's surgical oncologist at Dana Farber and is the director of the Comprehensive Breast Health Center at Brigham and Women's Hospital. But I'm not convinced that it will begin a lymphedema cycle. There's been so little research done on this disease."

The first time Cotting took to the water, in 1993, she was simply looking to add a little excitement to her life. Seven years later when she joined the One in Nine crew team that competed in the Head of the Charles, the 50-year-old Beacon Hill woman was rowing her way to normalcy. All nine members of her crew — named after the national statistic that purports that one in nine women will be afflicted by breast cancer — were breast cancer survivors defying conventional wisdom about life after treatment.

About 550 female rowers will be interviewed about their medical history workout habits, and bodies, as well as have their arms measured.

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