

Three months after being diagnosed with Stage 3 breast cancer, Kathy King is hula dancing.

Dressed in pink, she's also blowing translucent bubbles in the air and waving around a gauzy scarf to the sounds of Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun."

It's all part of a class in the Lebed Method, a fitness program designed to physically rehabilitate breast cancer patients, held at the Cancer Therapy & Research Center.

Both the Lebed Method and the Pink Ribbon Program, a modified form of Pilates developed for postoperative breast cancer patients, use gentle movement to improve the quality of life for women and men affected by the disease.

While neither program is intended to replace prescribed physical therapy, they can increase mobility and strength, reduce scarring, decrease depression and raise self-esteem.

Some medical studies indicate that regular exercise helps breast cancer patients recuperate and may help them live longer.

"The thing is to get the body up and moving," says Diane Severino, a Los Angeles Pilates instructor and expert in movement therapy. "It's uplifting. And if you feel better and more positive about yourself, that helps your recovery."

Sherry Lebed Davis and her brothers, Dr. Marc Lebed and Dr. Joel Lebed, developed the Lebed Method for their mother, a former professional ballroom dancer who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1979.

The Lebed Method, which incorporates ballet and jazz movements with upbeat music, was soon adopted at Albert Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia for other patients who underwent surgery for breast cancer. It is now taught in 12 countries.

Movements with a purpose

Each movement has a therapeutic purpose for the students: blowing bubbles encourages deep breathing, raising their arms improves shoulder range of motion and wagging their fingers during the hula reduces swelling in their hands.

Plus, it's fun.

"It absolutely does not look therapeutic. It's suppose to be an absolute hoot, fun and fabulous," says Lebed Davis, who lives outside Seattle and is a breast cancer survivor herself.

Students "feel alive and well again," she says. "It's a celebration of the body and what it still can do."

The routines are appropriate for any fitness level. Lebed Davis says students should see results in six weeks.

The classes are popular because they're informal and easy, says Barbara Owens, clinical assistant professor in the department of acute nursing at the UT Health Science Center.

Owens is one of three certified instructors who teach the Lebed Method as part of the Cancer Therapy & Research Center's

wellness programs. The class has been offered since June 2007 and is free to the public, thanks to a grant from Susan G. Komen for the Cure.

The classes also serve as a kind of support group for breast cancer patients who are taking steps to improve their health, Owens says.

"I have enjoyed the companionship," says King, who is wearing a Lebed Method T-shirt that reads "Surviving is important, but thriving is elegant."



Jerilyn Blanchard, left, instructs fellow breast cancer survivor Staci Foster in Fletcher Towel Work Pilates at her home fitness studio.

King is undergoing chemotherapy and is scheduled for a radical mastectomy next year. She wanted to try the Lebed Method to avoid developing lymphedema, a swelling caused by blockage in the lymphatic system, caused by cancer cells, surgery or radiation treatment.

She also wants to keep active after she had to stop gardening because bacteria and mold in the soil can be dangerous for patients in chemotherapy.

"I love that it's not a sense of competition. It is slow and easy movement," King says.

That's essential for cancer patients who may be intimidated by gyms, Owens says, or feeling fatigued or in pain from treatment or surgery.

Myra Abaowa wanted to try the Lebed Method to help offset the side effects of the chemotherapy she's undergoing for Stage 4 widespread metastasized breast cancer.

Like the other women in the class, she smiles and laughs as she does chorus-line kicks and pretends to balance on a surfboard and reach for chocolates on a supermarket shelf.

"I loved it. I really loved the props," she says after her first class. "It awakened me. I was feeling a little sluggish, and I could feel my body tingling throughout."

Owens ends the class with a snack of lemonade and pink yogurt.

"Do something nice for yourself," she tells the women. "Remember you're beautiful."

Life after breast cancer