

‘When I am out running or cycling, I feel so grateful for my body’ – How exercise aided Francesca’s recovery from life-threatening cancer

When Francesca Williams was diagnosed with cancer in July 2017, her life was instantly changed as her excruciating and hugely invasive nine-month treatment programme of chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery began. During her treatment Francesca couldn't wait to get back to physical activity and through running, cycling and even scuba diving, she has forged a lifestyle she loves as she takes steps towards recovery. This is her story.

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Prior to July 2017, Francesca was a fit and healthy 26-year-old, living in Cambridge and working as an art consultant. She had always enjoyed physical activity as a way to keep in shape and maintain her own wellbeing. “Exercise had been something that helped me deal with mental health issues previously in my life. It gave me an outlet to work through all different kinds of stress. It was something I did for myself, something that made me feel strong and empowered,” she said.

When she was diagnosed with the rare form of cancer, Ewing's sarcoma, her whole world shifted. She knew the components of her life that she had become familiar and comfortable with would likely never be the same again. “Leading up to my diagnosis I had noticed a decline in my abilities but I had no idea cancer was the reason,” she continued. “When I knew I would need surgery, I worried about what that would do to my body, to my strength.”

During her intense treatment programme she remained as active as possible, finding ways to

keep moving despite the restrictions it placed on her mind and body. “When you're young you feel invincible” she said. “The chemotherapy zapped my energy, but I tried to maintain a level of fitness.” Starting with slow walks down her road, Francesca forced herself to exercise, committed to the belief that keeping active would give her the best chance of beating the disease, overcoming the treatment, and recovering afterwards.

As with anyone undergoing major treatment for serious illness, Francesca was forced to spend a lot of time sitting around which frustrated her. Once her treatment was complete, she couldn't wait to begin her recovery through activity. “As soon as I was able to start being active again I did. Cycling, walking, skiing, enjoying the outdoors like I always have, was something I couldn't wait to get back to,” she continued.

Francesca also began running after her family suggested it would be fun for them all to do the Great North Run together in September of this year. After her experience of cancer, Francesca is determined to keep moving: “When I am out running or cycling, I feel so grateful for my body, I may have lost a few ribs to cancer but I feel stronger than ever, mentally and physically.”

Francesca is pragmatic in that she knows she occasionally pushes



herself too far and hasn't yet returned to weight training. But she's thankful for the independence regular physical activity gives her: “I believe if I want to do something, then I just need to work up to it, I don't rule anything out. I have even tried scuba diving since my thoracic surgery. I worry about not having enough time, but I also know some things can't be rushed. Anything worth having or achieving doesn't come without perseverance.”

Shine Cancer Support, one of the few charities in the UK to support young adults, have been a big part of Francesca's cancer story. They provided invaluable emotional and informational support during her treatment. Now she volunteers with Corinne Richards to run Shine's network in Norwich. Their aim is to bring the amazing work Shine does to Norfolk by running monthly meet ups to support other young adults with cancer.

To find out more about Francesca's Great North Run challenge visit her page:

www.uk.virginmoneygiving.com/ChezHanGNR2019

If you or someone you know has been diagnosed with cancer, visit our Your Health pages to find out more about exercises you can do to aid recovery. Visit www.activenorfolk.org/cancer for more information.

