How lifestyle therapies can help cancer survivors

My name is Chris Tzarimas and I'm the director here at the Lifestyle Clinic which is part of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of New South Wales.

We provide lifestyle and exercise therapy services for people with various health conditions; primarily breast, bowel and prostate cancers.

Cancer survivors present with a range of issues arising from surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and reconstruction, and many of these health issues can be assisted and even managed by lifestyle therapies including exercise therapy.

Some of the more common issues that arise are things like post-cancer fatigue. It is an unexplained fatigue symptom that goes beyond three months from completion of treatment. It can be a source of high anxiety and debilitating effect for the patient, impacting on their quality of life. The generalised fatigue symptoms are accompanied by other symptoms including poor concentration; some people say cognitive impairment; sleep-wake cycle disturbance, meaning poor sleep quality or poor sleep patterns; abnormal sensations or pain symptoms; and of course mood disorders that accompany the condition.

A physical activity or graded exercise program, particularly when combined with cognitive behavioural therapy, has shown to be beneficial for the management for those sorts of symptoms.

You’ve also got metabolic and cardiovascular risk factors that arise. Things like insulin resistance and also an increased risk of type 2 diabetes. Osteoporosis is another condition that arises as a consequence of the treatment and this can be exacerbated by what we term as a sarcopenic obesity.

These are significant changes in body composition. Increases in body fat are accompanied by decreases in lean tissues or muscle mass.

Lifestyle therapies, in particular exercise therapy, help to counter these sorts of changes.