

## [ HEALTH ]



Tribune photos by Michael Tercha

Certified laughter yoga instructor Tim Nelson and patient Kathleen Barone have a fake laugh "fight" during a session at Swedish Covenant.

# Cancer as a laughing matter

This brand of yoga rallies the body's own defenses

By Terri Yablonsky Stat  
Special to the Tribune

It's Monday morning at Swedish Covenant Hospital's Cancer Treatment Center. Several patients are hooked to IV infusion pumps, with drugs dripping through their veins to destroy cancer cells. And they're laughing. Yes, they're in hysterics.

These patients are enjoying the benefits of laughter yoga, a program that started at Swedish Covenant Hospital last fall. Laughter yoga is based on the premise that laughter reduces stress, strengthens the immune system, decreases anxiety and is a natural painkiller.

"The program is designed to help people cope with their cancer and keep their minds off chemotherapy," said Tim Nelson, certified laughter yoga instructor who leads the group. Although movement is limited because of the intravenous hookups, the class involves stretching, breathing and of course, laughing.

The group starts out doing deep-breathing exercises and adds basic head and shoulder stretches. "Then we add laughing, which always feels fake at first," Nelson said. "They start out ho ho ho, ha ha ha. That leads to genuine laughter. It takes 10 to 15 minutes for people to get into it. Some can't stop laughing."

"There's a healing power to laughter," Nelson said. "It helps you mentally and physically." Laughter yoga involves the staples of yoga, such as breathing, stretching and centering feelings, then adds hearty laughter. "There's a real need during chemotherapy for some positive interaction," he said. "Everyone is glowing when they're done."



"At first I thought it may be a little embarrassing ...but we get into it," Barone says. "It makes you feel good."

Laughter opens airways, improves blood flow, oxygenates the blood, releases endorphins and helps pass time, Nelson said. It also helps fight infection by boosting immunity.

Dr. Joseph Philip, oncologist and hematologist at Swedish Covenant who attends each laughter yoga session, agrees that laughter yoga has physical as well as mental benefits. "My clinical observation is that patients who do laughter yoga are much better off than others. Patients who are more active are more optimis-

tic and have a much better way of living through illness.

"We know that laughter has been shown to promote well-being. Studies have shown that laughter has some influence on immunity, and immunity can fight off cancer and decrease infections and complication rates. Physically, laughter can improve bodily functions. It clears the lungs and improves heart function."

Laughter yoga is meant to be done in a group, but patients are encouraged to use the technique during their daily lives. "It's about keeping that positive attitude going during something so stressful, scary and negative," Nelson said. "To watch them laugh in the face of that is incredible."

The benefits are real. "At first I thought it may be a little embarrassing to be sitting there laughing in front of other people, but we get into it," said Kathleen Barone, 46, of Chicago, who has lung cancer. "It makes you feel good."

As a registered nurse in Swedish Covenant's endoscopy area, Barone's work is stressful, she said. "Every now and then when things are getting kind of tough, I remember one particular session and I just start laughing. It does make me feel better. It lightens everything up."

"Laughter is the best medicine," Philip said. "It's free and has no side effects. What else can you ask for? Some patients are not interested early on, but when they try it, they change their mind because they feel better."

Chemotherapy has a bad reputation, he added. "If patients can get their mind on something else, it takes away the negative feelings toward treatment and can affect their perception of nausea."

The feedback from patients has been so great that Swedish Covenant has decided to start classes in its rehabilitation center, cardiac rehabilitation center and long-term care area as well.