

Astronaut faces medical problems

SPACE CENTER, Houston (AP) — Astronaut Shannon Lucid can expect to feel weak, woozy, wobbly and fatigued and much heavier than her 150 pounds when she returns to Earth's gravity for the first time in six months.

night. She had been living on the orbiting complex since March. "Do svidaniya," Lucid called out to the three men left behind on Mir — goodbye in Russian — as Atlantis slipped into the blackness of space.

Her replacement on Mir, NASA astronaut John Blaha, was moved by the sight of the departing shuttle, which will return in January to pick him up.

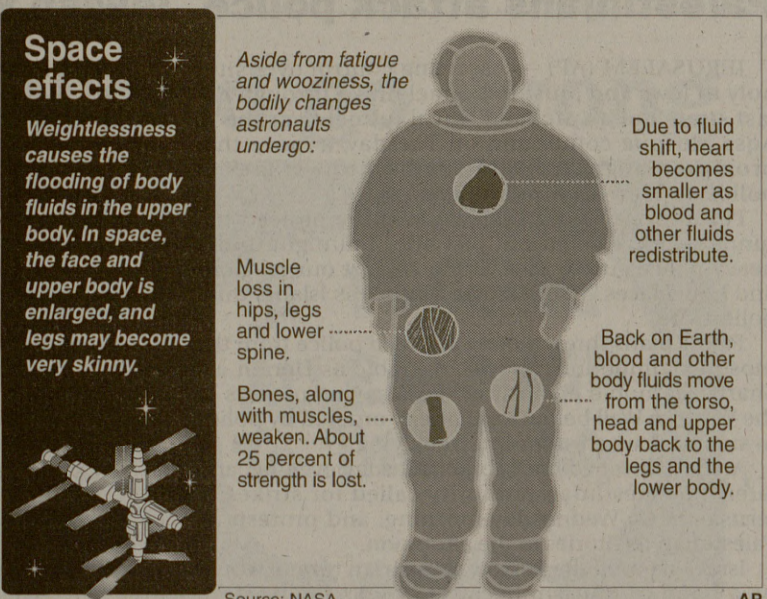
"Wow, it's a sight that I'll never forget," he said.

Astronauts and cosmonauts can lose up to 25 percent of their strength while in orbit because in zero gravity there's little need to use the muscles. They also lose bone, for reasons that aren't entirely clear.

Often, they feel lightheaded upon return to Earth when the blood shifts back into the lower body. And they feel heavy because they are unaccustomed to the pull of gravity.

Lucid, who has a Ph.D. in biochemistry, has insisted she feels fine and said her weight has remained fairly steady. She exercised on Mir's treadmill, stationary cycle and other equipment up to two hours a day to fight bone and muscle loss.

NASA has no mission-duration limit for its astronauts. The world record is held by Dr. Valery Polyakov, a Russian cosmonaut whose 438-day Mir mission ended last year. He seems to have come out of it well. So has cosmonaut Yelena Kondakova, whose



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Dr. Roger Billica
Chief of medical operations, Johnson Space Center

169-day Mir mission was the longest spaceflight by a woman until Lucid eclipsed that record earlier this month.

As soon as Atlantis lands, Lucid will be carried from the shuttle on a stretcher for her own safety and to allow doctors to take her blood pressure and other vital signs. She will stand up only when she feels ready.

A NASA flight surgeon will be constantly at her side, even after she returns home to Houston with her husband and three children. Others doctors will be on call, as well as a dietitian, physical therapist and psychologist.

"There's definitely some psychological readaptation," Billica said. "They've been isolated, confined and remote, and now it's time to come home and it's time

Space travelers generally overcome most of the side effects within weeks or months. Only the other woman, Russian, has come close to spending this much time in orbit.

Will the 53-year-old Lucid have a higher risk of developing osteoporosis because of the bone lost during her 188 days of weightlessness? What about cancer from space radiation? Could her life be shortened?

"That's the sort of thing that 20 years from now maybe we'll have an answer to," said Dr. Roger Billica, chief of medical operations at Johnson Space Center. "In the meantime, it is a concern, not because we think that we're putting them in increased risk but because we want to make sure we're not."

Lucid began the final leg of her long-awaited journey home when Atlantis undocked from the Russian space station Mir on Monday

Coping with Cancer

GLEN COVE, N.Y. (AP) — When Karushchkat was recuperating from cancer, she longed for the routine and motivation her job provided. But one week after her first chemotherapy treatment, she was

"I thought I was being called to the dictation," the former legal secretary recalled. Instead, Karushchkat — who missed five days of work after a mastectomy — she was told: "I can't afford to pay you anymore."

"I couldn't believe what I was hearing," said Karushchkat, 45. The voice inside my head was screaming. "You can't do that! You are one weakling!"

But they do. Employees with cancer are fired or laid off five times more often as others, according to a survey issued Tuesday by Working Women magazine and Amgen, a Thousand Oaks, Calif., company that makes drugs to lessen chemotherapy side effects.

And when cancer patients do

keep their jobs, they are often stripped of important duties by supervisors who believe the treatment will slow the workers down.

One in 14 cancer survivors (7 percent) interviewed said they were fired or laid off because of their illness. Of all American workers, only one in 80 (1.3 percent) was fired or laid off in 1995, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The May telephone survey included interviews with 100 supervisors, 100 co-workers and 500 cancer survivors who worked while undergoing treatment.

Eighty-five percent of supervisors said they believe the cancer survivors who worked for them suffered fatigue while undergoing chemotherapy. Seventy-four percent of the supervisors also cited nausea, yet only 33 percent of the cancer patients had that side effect.

"Today a majority of patients are treated as outpatients and there are new medicines that dramatically reduce and often eliminate

Cancer patients discriminated against in therapeutic jobs

chemotherapy side effects like low blood counts, nausea," said Dr. Ellen Gold, a hematologist-oncologist at Beth Israel Medical Center. "It seems (employers) just aren't aware of that yet."

Most treatments also can be scheduled for Friday after work, giving patients the weekend to recover, she said.

Lani Stewart of Westminster, Colo., was laid off from her purchasing job three years after being diagnosed with breast cancer.

Though the company told her she was being let go because of "necessary reductions in the work force," Stewart, 42, is convinced the self-insured company simply didn't want to risk future medical bills.

Despite the illness, Karushchkat believes her work would not have suffered. The Long Island woman points to the lavish flower gardens she designed and nurtured, the vegetable garden bursting with mega-squashes, the basement lined with hand-painted oils — all done while undergoing chemotherapy.

"Having a job was an important motivation for getting up every morning," said Karushchkat, who is bald because of the cancer treatments. "When I lost my job, it was like the rug was pulled out from under me."

Of those surveyed, 81 percent of survivors said their job helped them maintain emotional stability during their treatment.

"Too many employers don't understand that people with cancer can function close to 100 percent," said Richard Glovsky, a Boston lawyer who specializes in discrimination cases.

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