



Lymphedema Prevention

for Breast Cancer Patients

What Is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is an accumulation of lymphatic fluid in the tissues. The condition can develop when lymph nodes are missing, damaged or have been surgically removed. Left untreated, the accumulated, stagnant fluid causes tissue channels to increase in size and number, reduces oxygen availability, interferes with wound healing, and provides a culture medium for bacteria that can result in infection.

SYRACUSE, NEW YORK

Who Is At Risk?

Anyone who has had either a simple mastectomy, lumpectomy or modified radical mastectomy in combination with axillary (underarm) node dissection and/or radiation therapy. Lymphedema can occur immediately postoperatively, within a few months, a couple of years, or even 20 years or more after cancer therapy. Upwards of five percent of breast cancer survivors are afflicted with lymphedema in their first year of survival, but the life-long rate is between 30 and 40 percent of patients who had lymph nodes removed and/or received radiation therapy. With proper education and care, lymphedema can be avoided or, if it develops, kept well under control.

What Precautions Should I Take?

The following instructions should be reviewed carefully and, if necessary, discussed with your physician or therapist.

1. Absolutely do not ignore any slight increase of swelling in the arm, hand, fingers, or chest wall (consult with your doctor immediately).
2. Never allow an injection or a blood draw in the affected arm(s). You may wish to wear a lymphedema alert bracelet, available from the National Lymphedema Network (see back cover) as a reminder.
3. Have blood pressure checked on the unaffected arm, or, if both arms are affected, on the thigh.
4. Keep the at-risk arm(s) spotlessly clean. Use lotion (Eucerin, Lymphoderm, Curel, or whatever works best for you) after bathing. When drying, be gentle, but thorough. Make sure to dry any creases and between the fingers.
5. Avoid vigorous, repetitive movements with the affected arm (e.g. scrubbing, pushing or pulling motions).
6. Avoid heavy lifting with the affected arm. Never carry heavy handbags or bags with over-the-shoulder straps on your affected side.
7. Do not wear tight jewelry or elastic bands around affected fingers or arm.
8. Avoid extreme temperature changes when bathing or washing dishes. It is recommended that you avoid saunas and hot tubs (or at least keep the at-risk arm out of the hot tub). Protect the arm from the sun at all times.
9. Try to avoid any type of trauma (bruising, cuts, sunburn or other burns, sports injuries, insect bites, cat scratches) to the arm. (Watch for subsequent signs of infection.)
10. Wear gloves while doing housework, gardening or any type of work that could result in even a minor injury.
11. When manicuring your nails, avoid cutting your cuticles (inform you manicurist).
12. Exercise is important, but consult with your therapist. Do not overtire an arm at risk: if it starts to ache, lie down and elevate it. Recommended exercises: walking, swimming, light aerobics, bike riding, and specially designed ballet or yoga. (Do not lift more than 15 lbs.)
13. When planning to travel by air, ask your doctor or therapist if you should wear a compression sleeve. Increase fluid intake while in the air.
14. Patients with large breasts should wear light breast prostheses (heavy prostheses may put too much pressure on the lymph nodes above the collar bone). Soft padded shoulder straps may have to be worn. Wear a well-fitting bra that is not too tight and, ideally, with no underwire.

15. Use an electric razor to remove underarm hair. Maintain the razor properly, replacing heads as needed.
16. Patients with lymphedema should wear a well-fitted compression sleeve during all waking hours. At least every 4-6 months, see your therapist for follow-up. If the sleeve is too loose, most likely the arm circumference has reduced or the sleeve is worn.
17. If you notice a rash, itching, redness, pain, increase of temperature or fever, see your physician immediately. An inflammation (or infection) in the affected arm could be the beginning or worsening of lymphedema.
18. Maintain your ideal weight through a well-balanced, low sodium, high-fiber diet. Avoid smoking and alcohol. Lymphedema is a high protein edema, but eating too little protein will not reduce the protein element in the lymph fluid; rather, this may weaken the connective tissue and worsen the condition. The diet should contain easily digested protein (chicken, fish, tofu).

If you are diagnosed with lymphedema or suspect you have the condition, ask your physician to refer you to a program such as University Hospital's Lymphedema Management Program. For a free brochure or more information about this program please call 315-464-2300.

National Lymphedema Network, Inc.

Hotline: 800-541-3259

Direct: 510-208-3200

Fax: 510-208-3110

Web: www.lymphnet.org

