



patienthandout

NOTES

Your doctor or therapist has given you this patient education handout to further explain or remind you about an issue related to your health. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, discuss them with your doctor or therapist.

Managing Upper Extremity Lymphedema

FEW ORDEALS ARE AS FRIGHTENING AS BREAST cancer treatment. The words chemotherapy and radiation alone produce anxiety and fear. When treatment is over, survivors are just so happy to be cancer-free that they often don't consider the after-effects of their treatment—one of which is upper extremity lymphedema.

Symptoms of this condition include limb swelling, tenderness, heaviness, tightness and pain in the arms, chest wall and soft breast tissue. Left untreated, lymphedema can lead to serious infections.

Removing lymph nodes is an important part of breast cancer treatments so doctors can determine whether the cancer has spread from its primary site. Without these nodes, however, lymphatic fluid often builds up in tissues, causing lymphedema.

Three stages—ranging from mild to severe—characterize lymphedema.

- *Stage One (mild lymphedema).* During this phase, tissue is still in a pitting stage. This means that when you press an area with your finger, it will indent and hold the indentation briefly. Usually when you wake in the morning, the area is normal. As the day progresses, however, slight swelling can occur.

- *Stage Two (moderate lymphedema).* The tissue now has a spongy consistency and is non-pitting. This means that when pressed, it bounces back without any indentation. Fibrosis (formation of fibrous tissue) begins in this stage, marking the beginning of limb hardening and notable swelling.

- *Stage Three (severe lymphedema).* In this stage, swelling is irreversible, and usually the affected area is very large. The tissue is hard (fibrotic) and unresponsive.

Treatment Options

No quick cures for the condition exist. But you can find relief from properly trained therapists who can move accumulated fluid out of affected areas. This process is called Complete Decongestive Therapy (CDT).

CDT is based on a self-education concept that includes Manual Lymph Drainage. This is a form of massage consisting of rhythmic strokes that stimulate lymphatic vessels to contract and encourage lymph flow. CDT also includes compression bandaging; exercise,

such as swimming, biking and walking; and skin care. If skin isn't maintained, lesions can develop that allow bacteria to enter an already immune-compromised system. This can lead to additional lymph system destruction, hospitalization or further functional limitations. With CDT treatment, however, skin is maintained and swelling reduction usually occurs in four to 14 treatments over two to four weeks, depending on the severity of your symptoms.

To help sustain swelling reduction in the arms, medical-grade compression garments are usually required. If you have chest wall or breast lymphedema, compression bras are also available, offering support that conventional and athletic bras don't.

With proper education and care, lymphedema can be avoided:

1. Don't ignore any slight increase of swelling in your arm, hand, fingers or chest wall.
2. Never allow an injection or blood drawing in your affected arm(s).
3. Have your blood pressure checked regularly.
4. Keep the edemic or at-risk (arm)s spotlessly clean. Use lotion after bathing, and when drying, be gentle and thorough.
5. Avoid vigorous, repetitive movements, such as scrubbing, pushing and pulling.
6. Avoid heavy lifting. Never carry heavy handbags or bags with over-the-shoulder straps on your affected side.
7. Don't wear tight jewelry or elastic bands around affected fingers or arm(s).
8. Avoid extreme temperature changes when bathing or washing dishes. Protect your arm from the sun at all times as well.
9. Avoid trauma, such as bruises, cuts or sunburns.
10. When air travelling, wear a well-fitted compression sleeve.
11. Maintain you ideal weight through a low sodium, high-fiber diet, and avoid smoking and alcohol.

With proper education, you can recognize lymphedema's signs and seek treatment early to avoid the condition's irreversible effects.

Information adapted from www.bellissee.com/patients/lymphedema.shtml and the National Lymphedema Network, accessed via www.lymphnet.org