

Lymphedema Prevention and Treatment for the Arm

Lymphedema is swelling in the arm that occurs when the lymph system does not drain properly on the side of your surgery. This may happen when some of the lymph nodes under the arm are surgically removed or treated with radiation or the cancer has spread to these lymph nodes.

Although it is not always clear why some people have swelling and others do not, it is sometimes related to infection, injury or trauma involving the arm. Its development, however, does not necessarily mean there is a recurrence of cancer. The condition can occur within days, months or years after treatment.

With improvements to surgery and radiation therapy, the risk of developing lymphedema has lessened. Yet, it is still important for you to be aware of this condition and what you can do to prevent it.

If you notice any swelling in your arm, hand, upper back or chest, call your breast doctor or primary physician as soon as possible. You may be referred to a physical therapist for a comprehensive lymphedema management program that includes education, exercise, compression bandaging, manual lymphatic drainage therapy and fitting of compression garments.

Lymph Drainage

To help promote lymph drainage, follow these guidelines:

- Maintain full, active range of motion in the arm on the side of your surgery.
- Prevent trapping more fluid in the arm on the side of your surgery.
- When having blood pressure taken, use the opposite arm. If both sides have been treated, ask your doctor for advice.
- Avoid wearing tight or elastic shirt sleeves.
- During long car trips or airplane flights drink plenty of water, stand and stretch when possible and elevate the arm with pillows.

Infection and Injury Prevention

Infection or injury may trigger the onset or increase the severity of lymphedema. Call your doctor immediately if your arm, hand, upper back or chest shows any sign of infection such as red streaks (particularly on the arm or chest wall), redness, warmth, pain, hardness, constant ache or heaviness (particularly on the arm or chest wall) and/or fever.

To help prevent infection or injury, follow these precautions:

- Avoid needle insertions in your affected arm, including blood draws, vaccinations or other injections. Use your healthy arm for blood draws. If you need a medical procedure on your affected arm, such as removing skin growths, ask your cancer doctor first.
- Avoid excessive heat, such as saunas, whirlpool spas or extremely hot showers. Keep the arm cool in hot weather.
- Avoid burns, cuts and scratches to the hand and arm.
- Keep hands and cuticles soft.