

# LYMPHEDEMA MANAGEMENT

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# LYMPHEDEMA F&Q

## PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN A CURE.

### WHAT IS LYMPHEDEMA?

- Lymphedema is the swelling that occurs in one or both of your arms or legs.
- Lymphedema is most commonly caused by the removal of or damage to your lymph nodes often associated with the treatment of cancer.
- Lymphedema results from a blockage within your lymphatic system.
  - Your lymphatic system is part of your immune system.
  - The swelling you experience is due to the impaired ability of lymph fluid to drain correctly due to any type of blockage.

### WHAT WILL I EXPERIENCE WITH LYMPHEDEMA?

- Swelling of your affected extremity
- Feeling of heaviness or tightness in your affected extremity
- Pain in your affected extremity
  - Any swelling, especially when it occurs rapidly, will cause pain.
  - Tensely swollen tissues are painful.
- Loss of function in your affected extremity
  - The pain combined with the swelling of your extremity may impact your ability to function.
  - Your swollen extremity is also more susceptible to minor traumas due to impaired control and function. These minor traumas are much more likely than normal to become infected due to the poor blood supply of the tissues. These infections unfortunately worsen the swelling and skin changes.

### WHY AM I BEING REFERRED TO THERAPY IF I DON'T HAVE ANY SYMPTOMS?

- Lymphedema can often be prevented or avoided for many years after an operation or radiotherapy.
- Post-operatively and post-radiotherapy patients should be carefully educated immediately, including proper exercises.
- If you are a breast cancer survivor who has had an axillary lymph node dissection, you have lifetime risk of 15-25%.
- If you are a breast cancer survivor who has had sentinel node techniques, without adjuvant radiation, the risk is 6%.
- Radiation can cause damage to the lymphatic system just as surgery can. If you have received radiation therapy alone, your risk of lymphedema is 15-25%. If you received radiation and lymph node resection, your risk is increased.
- The primary risk for lymphedema development is the first 3 years following surgery and radiation therapy. 90% of cases occur within this first year. 95% of cases occur within the first three years.

### WHAT WILL THERAPY DO WHEN I COME TO THE CLINIC?

- The therapist will ask you questions about any symptoms or complaints.
- The therapist will ask you questions about your daily activities to understand your interests and needs.
- The therapist will take measurements of your “at risk” extremity and “normal” extremity.
- The therapist will provide you with appropriate exercises.
- The therapist will provide you with education on prevention and care of your “at risk” extremity.
- The therapist will refer you for continued therapy should you require management of your lymphedema or have any activity or functional limitations.

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### THE FOLLOWING SHOULD BE OBSERVED BY ALL PATIENTS POST-OPERATIVELY AND POST-RADIOTHERAPY.

1. Keep your “at risk” or affected extremity clean.
  - When drying, be gentle but thorough.
  - Make sure your underclothes and compression garments (if you have been issued) are regularly washed.
2. Avoid any trauma.
  - Be careful cutting nails.
  - Never cut calluses.
3. Never allow your “at risk” or affected extremity to become sunburnt.
  - Always use a broad spectrum high SPF sunburn cream.
  - Please remember you can still burn through synthetic compression garments.
4. Keep your “at risk” or affected extremity as cool as possible in hot weather.
  - Be careful of the water temperature in showers and spas.
  - If traveling for a long time in a car, drape a white shirt over your extremity in the sun.
5. Do not pick up heavy loads with an “at risk” or affected arm. Do not carry a handbag weighing greater than a gallon of milk with this arm.
6. Any redness should be reported to your physician immediately with concern for infection.
7. Keep your skin moist and hydrated.
8. Never allow someone to measure blood pressure, take blood, or give an injection into an “at risk” arm.
9. Remove hair only with a properly maintained electric razor.
10. If travelling by air, it is a good precaution to wear a compression garment or additional pressure bandages.
11. There should be no redness or indentation when you remove clothing.
12. If you have an “at risk” or affected arm, it is important to ensure that your bra is not too tight around the ribs or the shoulders.
  - A good supporting one helps prevent edema forming in the breasts.
  - A wider shoulder strap is recommended.
13. Tight jewelry should not be worn.
14. Do not lie on the arm when sleeping or resting.
15. A normal balanced diet is best.
16. If you are under severe psychological stress, concentrate on relaxing your shoulders, back, and neck.
  - Stand straight.
  - Constant tension in your shoulder and neck may precipitate lymphedema in an “at risk” arm.

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### WHEN TO CONTACT YOUR THERAPIST

1. You have an increase size in your affected extremity.
2. You have a feeling of heat in your affected extremity.
3. You have a bursting sensation in your affected extremity.
4. You have red patches in your skin on your affected extremity.
5. You have puffiness in your affected extremity.
6. You have pitting when you press the skin of your affected extremity.
7. You have aching of your affected extremity.
8. You have any swelling or heat in the trunk on the same side as your operation/treatment.
9. You have swelling of your opposite side.
10. You have swelling in any other limb or a general all-over swelling which is not due to overeating or medications.
11. You are unable to pick up a fold of skin on your affected extremity.
12. You have leaking of fluid from your affected extremity.

# LIVING WITH LYMPHEDEMA

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

1. Your way of life may need to be modified to prevent excessive stress to your involved limb.
2. If you care for you limb, you can have the size and swelling of your limb reduced and return to your prior level of life.
3. Wear you compression garments at all times, including the night.
4. If you are going out for a special occasion, you may be able to leave the compression garment off just for the event.
  - Try at home, several days in advance.
  - Measure your limb before and after about the same period of time your event will be.
  - If you limb circumference increases or aches, do not risk going out without your garments.
  - This should only be attempted after 3 months minimum post your last course of therapy treatment.
5. If a garment does not cover your fingers and hand, and they swell, contact your therapist immediately.
6. Never use ointment under a garment, only under bandages.
7. Measure your limb once a month. If there is a real change (up or down), contact your therapist.
8. Contact your therapist immediately if your compression garments leaves a band in the following locations:
  - Wrist
  - Elbow
  - Under a limb
9. Contact your therapist immediately if your garment causes you to chafe at any point.
10. Exercise according to the recommendations by your therapist.
11. Wear your compression garments or bandages when you exercise.

# LIVING WITH LYMPHEDEMA

## CARE OF BANDAGES

1. Bandages should be washed daily.
  - a. This will keep them clean.
  - b. This will help them retain their shape.
2. Do not attempt to apply unrolled bandages.
3. Roll your bandages under tension.
  - a. Have someone hold one edge of the bandage.
  - b. Have the patient roll the bandage towards the “holder” using the flat of their hand.
4. PLEASE NOTE, all patients need a minimum of two sets of bandages.

## HOW MUCH EXERCISE?

1. Too much exercise is as bad as too little exercise.
2. Your limb should never ache after exercise. THIS IS THE NUMBER ONE SIZE YOU ARE OVERDOING IT!
3. The amount of exercise that should be performed on a daily basis must also take into the account your lifestyle and how much physical activity you get throughout the day.
4. If you have a day with a particularly high amount of heavy lifting and activity, you will achieve better results in the management of your lymphedema through the following:
  - a. Perform trunk clearance exercises as prescribed by your therapist if appropriate.
  - b. Rest and elevate the affected limb for 30 minutes.
5. You should avoid exercises or sports that place high stress on your affected limb.