

Lymphedema

Patient Education + Management Strategies

What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is an abnormal accumulation of protein-rich fluid in the tissues which causes swelling of a body part, most often an extremity. It can also occur in the face, neck, abdomen or genitals.

Lymphedema is a chronic condition which can lead to tissue fibrosis and increased risk of infections.

There are two types: primary + secondary

Primary lymphedema is due to imperfect development of the lymphatic system and is present at birth.

Secondary lymphedema may be the result of surgery, radiation, cancer, trauma, infection, obesity, chronic venous disease, or self induced.

The most common cause of secondary lymphedema is cancer and its treatments.

Risk factors:

- lymph node dissection (correlated with the extent of dissection)
- radiation treatment

Other risk factors are obesity, advanced disease at diagnosis, post-surgical drainage/seroma, infection, and venous and arterial blood flow abnormalities.

Will I develop lymphedema?

There are strategies you can implement to decrease your risk. It cannot always be prevented.

It is often impossible to know where we stand individually in this regard. Some individuals are born with abundant lymphatic systems which can withstand tremendous strain and insult before failing. Others have a less resilient system which does not offer sufficient reserve capacity to compensate to the trauma.



The lymphatic system functions:

- returns protein and water from the tissues back to the blood stream



- absorbs proteins, fat and fat-soluble vitamins through the lymph vessels



- recognizes and responds to foreign cells, microbes and defends the body against diseases

SKIN CARE

Wash skin thoroughly and frequently to maintain hygiene

Apply lotion/cream within 10 minutes of bathing – use low pH lotions

Avoid trauma and injury to the skin – animal scratches, exposure to biting or stinging insects

Avoid self-induced scratching, nail biting, etc

Use insect repellent and adequate sunscreen for protection

INFECTION MANAGEMENT

Treat all episodes of infection in the affected area as an urgent medical situation

Know the signs and symptoms of cellulitis

Wear non-constricting protective gear when doing an activity that could lead to trauma

For scratches, punctures, and breaks in the skin – wash with soap and water, pat dry, then apply a topical antibacterial

COMPRESSION

If you wear compression garments, wash often to avoid excessive moisture or bacteria/fungus exposure

Replace garments when recommended

Wear your usual compression garments for air travel, exercise and exertion

Avoid excessive constriction – tight sleeves, tight stockings, tight bra, excessive pressure from an underwire, tight waistbands, etc

NAIL CARE

Keep nails trimmed and short to avoid snagging on clothing

Always cut toenails in a straight line to avoid ingrown toenails

Avoid using a curved fingernail clipper for your toenails

Bring a personal file when receiving a pedicure or manicure – insist on properly disinfected tools

Push cuticles back gently instead of cutting them to avoid skin injury and inflammation

FOOT CARE

Avoid walking barefoot in public places

Always wear clean, dry socks – avoid excessive moisture following exercise and activities

Attend to blisters as soon as possible

Apply lotion/cream to dry areas of feet – avoid the areas between the toes

Avoid wearing damp shoes – allow for adequate drying

Wear slippers and/or socks at home if skin on sole of your foot is not fully intact

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Avoid exposure to extreme heat or cold to the extent that tissue injury could occur – burn or frostbite

Avoid situations that cause stasis

Use non-lymphedema limb for venous punctures if possible

Keep your body weight at optimal level

Exercise regularly (see position statement from National Lymphedema Network)

Seek a lymphedema trained therapist for treatment