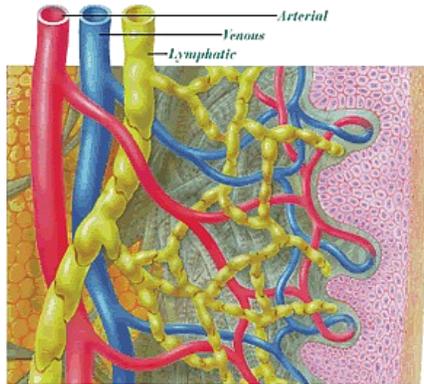


The Lymphatic System



The lymphatic system plays a large role in immune function and circulation. It is a network of vessels that collect extra fluid, wastes and proteins from the tissue spaces in order to prevent swelling, filter wastes and maintain healthy tissue.

What is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is an abnormal swelling of a body part. The lymph vessels that carry the fluid are damaged and/or overwhelmed leading to the build-up of fluid, protein and wastes in the tissues. Lymphedema is a chronic, non-curable but manageable condition if recognized and treated early.



Are You at Risk?

One in five breast cancer survivors will experience Lymphedema in their lifetime. The risk of developing Lymphedema in your lifetime increases if you have had more than one of these treatments:

- Surgery
- Lymph node removal
- Radiation

Lymphedema can present itself soon after surgery or not until years later. The majority of women will show signs within the first three years of treatment.

What Can I Do?

Remember, you have a life long risk of developing Lymphedema. It may not be preventable, but you can monitor your activities in order to prevent the mechanisms that can initiate swelling in the at risk arm.

The following guidelines can help you be proactive:

- Keeping the hand and arm clean and dry. Use non-perfumed, gentle soap and apply a pH-neutral moisturizing cream daily.
- Protect skin with sunscreen and insect repellent.
- If possible, avoid skin punctures, blood tests, IV's and blood pressure monitoring in arm.
- Wear a compression sleeve when flying or with strenuous activity.
- Wear gloves for gardening and dishwashing.

- Use an electric razor to shave underarms.
- Avoid pressure on the shoulder of the treatment side. Choose bras that have wide straps or slip a shoulder pad under the straps.
- Monitor the extremity during and after activity for any change in size, shape, soreness, heaviness or firmness.
- Avoid prolonged exposure to heat, particularly hot tubs or saunas for longer than 15 minutes.
- Maintain an ideal body weight.

How is Lymphedema Treated?

Lymphedema can be managed effectively by combined decongestive therapy (CDT). This is accomplished by the following:

Manual Lymph Drainage A rhythmical, light massage.

Compression Therapy Compression bandages or special compression garments are used to help decrease the swelling and prevent further accumulations.

Skin Care Properly moisturized and intact skin helps to prevent infection.

Exercise Exercise promotes lymphatic functioning. The golden rule is to not over-do it and listen to your body. Discuss your exercise plan with your therapist.

In order to properly treat Lymphedema, it is important to seek out a therapist that has had combined decongestive therapy (CDT) training.

What are the Early Signs of Lymphedema?

- Heaviness
- Tightness/tension
- Tight fitting clothes/jewellery
- Discomfort/“pins and needles”
- Aching/pain
- Bursting sensation
- Puffiness/swelling
- Reduced arm movement

Infection

Your risk of infection is greater with Lymphedema. The following signs and symptoms should not be ignored:

- Redness
- Warmth
- Pain
- Fever/chills
- Swelling

See your healthcare provider immediately if you have these signs or symptoms.

Information contained in this pamphlet is a community education initiative provided by your local decongestive therapists and the Grand River Regional Cancer Centre.

Community Contacts

Hope Spring Cancer Support Centre
43 Allen Street, Waterloo, ON
Phone: 519-742-4673

**Ministry of Health and Long Term Care:
Assisted Devices Program**
1-800-268-6021
www.gov.on.ca/health

Community Care Access Centre
800 King Street West, Kitchener, ON
Phone: (519) 748-2222 ext. 5817

Lymphovenous Association of Ontario
Lymphedema information, therapist contacts and support group information.
1-877-723-0033
www.lymphontario.org

Dr. Vodder School
1-250-598-9862
www.vodderschool.com

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Lymphedema



An Introduction for Breast Cancer Patients