

Lymphedema Issues

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Some people develop a condition known as lymphedema after treatment for breast cancer. Lymphedema is caused by the loss of damage to the underarm lymph nodes and their connection vessels. Because of the interruption of the normal function of the lymph system, circulation of lymph fluid may be slowed and the ability to fight infection impaired. Not all women will develop this problem, but should swelling occur, your doctor will advise you on the proper steps to take. This may include special exercises that are discussed in this handout.

EXERCISES:

- Raise your arm overhead and hold the position for one minute. Do this at least 1-2 times per hour.
- With the arm overhead, bend your elbow and then straighten again. Repeat 10-15 times per hour.
- With the arm overhead, clinch your fist, or squeeze a ball: relax, and then clinch your fist again. Repeat 10-15 times per hour.
- Lying down, elevate and support your arm at 90 degrees for 45 minutes each afternoon.

- ◆ Call your physician if the affected arm becomes swollen, red, or if it feels hot.
- ◆ You may “feel” swelling occur before it can be seen.
- ◆ Please call (225) 216-1118 anytime you have questions or concerns. If possible, try to get help with problems during the hours that help is most available.

Prophylaxis against lymphedema

Women who have had the underarm lymph nodes removed or who have been treated with radiation need to take special care of the affected arm and try to prevent any infection from occurring: Some basic guidelines are:

- Avoid burns while cooking, ironing, etc. The use of potholders and oven mitts is recommended.
- Avoid sunburns
- Have all injections, vaccinations, blood samples, and blood pressure tests done on the other arm whenever possible.
- Use an electric razor with a narrow head to underarm shaving to reduce trauma.
- Carry heavy packages or handbags on the other arm.
- Wash cuts promptly, treat them with antibacterial medication and cover them with sterile dressing. Check often for redness, soreness, or other signs of infection.
- Never cut cuticles. Use hand cream or lotion daily.
- Wear watches or jewelry loosely on the affected side.
- Wear protective gloves when gardening or using strong detergents. Avoid harsh chemicals and abrasive compounds.
- Use insect repellent to avoid bites and stings.
- Avoid elastic cuffs on blouses and nightgowns.