Precautions to Prevent Lymphedema Following Breast Surgery

Lymphedema is a problem that may occur after surgery and treatment of breast cancer. It is the swelling of the arm, armpit, breast or chest wall, on the side where the breast surgery was done. Lymph node removal, biopsy, and radiation treatment decreases the effectiveness of the lymphatic system which puts a person at risk for pooling of the fluid. Since lymph nodes do not grow back, this puts a person at risk all their life. Swelling may occur right away or it could occur a year or more later.

The following precautions will help prevent the onset of lymphedema.

Lymphedema may be caused by:
• Infection
• Too much pressure or tightness on the affected arm
• Heavy lifting and heavy activity
• Severe temperature changes
• Sun
• Insect bites
• Travel

Infection prevention
Infection of the arm, chest, or breast on the side where surgery was done, may trigger the onset of lymphedema. The following suggestions will help prevent infection:
• Good hygiene is important. Keep the skin clean and dry. Use gentle soaps and lotions to prevent skin dryness and irritation. Try to avoid soaps and lotions with perfumes. These contain alcohol and can be very drying to the skin. Some good choices for soaps are Dove, Neutrogena, Aveeno, Basis, and Oil of Olay. Use a moisturizing lotion if you have dry skin.
• Take precautions to avoid cutting or puncturing the skin of the affected arm. This may allow bacteria to get into the skin, which may lead to infection.
• Avoid having injections or blood drawn in the affected arm.
• Wear gloves while doing housework, gardening or other types of work that may cause cuts, scrapes, or punctures.
• Use an electric shaver instead of a safety razor. This will help avoid accidentally cutting the skin.
• Keep cuticles neat using lotions, rather than cutting them.

Signs of infection
These are possible signs and symptoms of infection. If any of the following are seen or felt, contact your doctor right away for treatment.
• Severe pain in the arm, breast or chest area
• Possible swelling of the affected area
• Red blotches or streaks on the arm, breast or chest wall
• Increased warmth or heat in the area
How to avoid too much pressure or tightness on the arm
Too much pressure on the arm may lessen the flow of the lymphatic fluid through the arm.
• Have blood pressure checked on the unaffected arm.
• Avoid wearing tight clothing or sleeves with tight elastic bands on the arm.
• Avoid wearing tight jewelry on the arm such as watches or rings. Wear these things on the unaffected side.
• Carry your purse on the unaffected side.

Activity guidelines
Heavy physical exertion causes blood to flow more quickly through the muscle and tissue. This can possibly overload the lymphatic system and cause swelling.
• Monitor your body’s response to activity and exercise. Begin new activity slowly and gradually increase the amount of time spent, repetitions and/or weight used.
• Talk to your doctor about exercise and participation in sports. Some sports activities may trigger a lymphedema condition.
• Avoid lifting and carrying heavy objects, bags, etc. with the affected arm.
• Vigorous, repetitive motions against resistance with the affected arm may possibly overload the lymphatic system. Alternate arms when washing windows, scrubbing the bathtub or floor. When your affected arm feels tired, allow it to rest to avoid potential problems.
• Keep free weight use to 3-5 pounds and limit resistance of exercise machines to 30 pounds to avoid too much force.

Temperature extremes
Extreme temperatures-both hot and cold may be harmful to the lymphatic system.
• Wear gloves if you must use very hot water for dishwashing, or make the water less hot.
• Water should be less hot for bathing and showering as well.
• Saunas and hot tubs should be avoided as the temperatures are usually well above 100°F. This may overload the lymphatic system.
• Wear gloves during cold weather anytime you are outside.
• Use gloves if working for a longer time in a refrigerated area, or freezer (such as defrosting).
• Ice or heating pad should not be used on the affected shoulder or arm for injuries.

Sun
Protect the affected arm from sunburn.
• Use sunscreen or sun block on the affected arm and reapply after being in water.
• Try to do outside activities early morning or later afternoon when the sunlight and temperature is less intense.

Insect bites
Insect bites may be a source for infection and inflammation.
• Use a good insect repellent when you are outdoors to avoid getting bites from mosquitoes and other insects.

Traveling
Sitting in one position, with the arm dependent (hanging down) while traveling, may contribute to potential onset of swelling.
• When traveling by plane, car, bus, or train for an extended time, do gentle exercises with the arms. Get up and walk to the bathroom (if able). This will prevent muscle stiffness and promote movement of the lymphatic fluid through the arm.
**Signs of lymphedema**

If you should notice swelling of the arm area, do the following:

- Elevate the arm above heart level.
- Reduce the amount of activity you are doing. Think about what you have done that is new or different in your routine, and if the swelling started after doing that.
- Look for signs of infection. If you suspect an infection, contact your doctor.
- If the swelling goes down within 3 days, gradually increase your activity and monitor your arm’s response to this.
- If the swelling does not go away within 3 days, contact your doctor.

* If you have had breast surgeries on both sides, consult your physician.*