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Lymphedema and Breast Cancer

Lymphedema is a chronic swelling that may occur after radiation treatment for breast cancer or after breast surgery. The lymph system drains fluid and waste from the body. As the fluid travels from the breast to the armpit, it passes through lymph nodes. This helps “clean up” and fight bacteria. Removal of, or damage to, the lymph nodes by surgery or radiation increases the risk of lymphedema. When the vessels are blocked or cannot “handle” the fluid, swelling occurs. The swelling may be mild or severe. It can develop soon after treatment or many years later.

Your risk for lymphedema increases if you have a history of:

- Inflammation of the lymph system (lymphangitis)
- Infection of the skin and underlying tissue (cellulitis)

Symptoms

Lymphedema often begins slowly. It may occur after an injury, insect bite, burn, muscle strain or infection of the hand, arm or upper body on the side of the surgery or radiation. Swelling may improve by elevating the affected arm.

Call your surgeon, or the radiation or medical oncologist, if you have:

- Swelling of the arm. Often, the swelling starts on the forearm on the same side as the little finger and under the elbow. Jewelry may feel too tight.
- Any signs of infection such as warmth, redness, rash, tenderness, weakness, chills or fever of 101.5° F or higher.
- Discomfort, tightness, heaviness of the arm and decreased range of motion. Pain is not usually a symptom.

Coping with Lymphedema

Know the risks, signs and steps to ease the effects of lymphedema.

Taking Care

- Proper skin care is very important. When bathing, gently dry the affected area.
- Use gentle or hypoallergenic cleansers and lotions to avoid skin irritation and dryness. Special lotions such as Eucerin®, Curel® or baby products are an option.
- Wear a well-fitted bra with soft, padded straps.
- During air travel, wear a well-fitted compression sleeve and have extra bandages for long flights. Increase water intake.
- Keep a healthy body weight. Avoid or limit alcohol intake.
- Do not smoke.

Preventing Injury

- Avoid cuts, scratches, hangnails, insect bites and burns that may lead to infection.
- Avoid cutting or picking your cuticles. Talk with your manicurist.
- Wear gloves while doing housework and gardening.
- Use a thimble while sewing.
- Wear oven mitts when handling hot foods.
- Apply non-irritating sunscreen and insect repellent when outdoors.
- Use an electric razor to remove hair.
- Never allow blood tests, injections or blood pressure measurement on the affected arm. Wear a lymphedema alert bracelet.
- When bathing or doing household chores, avoid extreme temperature changes. Test water temperatures with the other hand. Avoid saunas and hot tubs or keep affected arm out of water.
- Avoid tight-fitting clothing and jewelry.

Activities

Avoid using the affected arm for tiring household and yard chores, such as:

- Vacuuming
- Scrubbing
- Washing windows
- Shoveling/Raking/Hoeing

Do no heavy lifting with the affected arm. Carry shoulder bags or purses on the opposite side.

Exercise regularly, in moderation. Avoid repetitive motion activities or resistance exercises using the affected arm. Instead, try walking, swimming, light aerobics, bike riding, yoga or Tai Chi.

Do not overtire the affected arm. If your arm starts to feel tired or aches, stop and elevate it.

When to Call the Doctor

Check the affected arm for signs of infection. Call your doctor if these signs exist:

- Redness
- Warmth
- Swelling
- Pain or tenderness
- Fever

Other Resources

At Northwestern Memorial Hospital, lymphedema treatment is provided by a physical therapist at **Novacare**, located on the 9th floor of the Galter Pavilion, Suite 105. A doctor's prescription is needed.

Health Information Resources

For more information, visit one of Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Health Learning Centers. These state-of-the-art health libraries are located on the third floor of the Galter Pavilion and on the first floor of the Prentice Women's Hospital. Health information professionals are available to help you find the information you need and provide you with personalized support at no charge. You may contact the Health Learning Centers by calling 312-926-LINK (5465) or by sending an e-mail to hlc@nmh.org.

For additional information about Northwestern Memorial Hospital, please visit our Web site at www.nmh.org.

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