Managing Lymphedema

Lymphedema is a condition of localized fluid retention and tissue swelling that may be caused by cancer and cancer treatment. It usually affects an arm or leg, but it can also affect other parts of the body. It can develop at any time, including years later.

- **Limit activities.** You may feel better if you can limit certain activities. Stay away from repetitive movements and straining the muscles. Take a walk to help circulation.
- **Get correct compression garments.** Compression garments can help squeeze fluid through the remaining vessels before it builds up. Compression garments must be carefully fitted and monitored. See your clinician for help finding the one that is right for you.
- **Raised position.** If you are experiencing symptoms of lymphedema, try to keep the affected arm or leg above the level of the heart. Elevating the affected limb may temporarily help to reduce the swelling but don’t stretch or holding your arm over your head for extended periods of time.
- **Stay alert for signs of infection.** Poor drainage of the lymphatic system may make the affected limb more susceptible to infection. Check all areas of the limb daily for signs of infection. If you have a fever more than 100° F, chills, redness, pain, tenderness, heat, and/or swelling in the area, report any warning signs to your doctor immediately.
- **Control pain.** It’s important to address pain caused by lymphedema so you can eat well, sleep well, and maintain your quality of life. Do not hesitate to let you doctor know if your pain is not under control.
- **Communicate with your health care team.** Open communication with your health care team is important in any setting. Early detection is important especially in treating lymphedema. Let your care team know if you experience symptoms like swelling, feeling of heaviness or tightness, restricted range of motion or aching or discomfort, recurring infections or hardening and thickening of the skin.
- **Protect the affected area.** Scratches, sores, burns, insect bites, or other irritations will cause your body to make extra fluid. Wear protective gloves to avoid these injuries and avoid exposure to extreme cold or prolonged heat.
- **Dress comfortably.** Wear comfortable, well-fitting clothing and shoes. Avoid socks, hosiery, or undergarments with tight elastic bands or straps. Wear loose watches, jewelry, and gloves and carry your purse on the opposite arm.
- **Emotional support.** If you would like assistance to cope with lymphedema, talk with your doctor about available resources. As lymphedema can cause physical and emotional difficulties, support groups may be a great source for help.
- **Get proper nutrition.** Try to maintain a healthy weight, since being overweight can increase the chances of swelling. Avoid foods high in salt and fat. A registered dietitian can help develop an appropriate meal plan for you.
- **Rehab therapy.** It is important to stay as active as possible. Your doctor can refer you to a rehabilitation or massage therapist trained in managing lymphedema. One is available through our integrative therapy program at the Cancer Center, and she can assess your condition and work with you to develop an individualized lymphedema management plan.

*NOTE: Always seek the advice of your qualified healthcare provider regarding the management of lymphedema. These tips are not intended nor implied for treatment in lieu of professional medical advice.*