

# Lymphedema after Breast Cancer

## What is the lymphatic system?

The lymphatic system is made up of lymph nodes that extend throughout the body, lymphatic tissue, and small vessels (similar to blood vessels) that contain fluid called lymph.

The lymphatic system works with the blood system to maintain and protect the balance of fluid in the surface tissues of the body by draining, filtering, and transporting lymphatic fluid around the body. It also helps the body to fight infection.

## What is lymphedema?

If a lymph vessel or node becomes blocked, the lymph fluid is unable to pass along it. Because the excess tissue fluid cannot drain away normally, it builds up and causes swelling. When the swelling is in the lymph system, it is called lymphedema (pronounced lim-fa-DEE-ma) and causing swelling. A breast cancer sufferer with lymphedema will have a swollen arm, hand, or both.

## Why might it affect someone after breast cancer surgery?

Someone who has had breast cancer may be prone to lymphedema because the cancer may have damaged the cells of the lymph nodes, the lymph nodes may have been removed, or radiotherapy may have interfered with the normal drainage of lymph fluid. Lymphedema can occur directly after surgery or radiotherapy, or it can occur many years later. Not every breast cancer survivor will get lymphedema.

## How do I know if I have lymphedema?

The affected arm may become swollen, stiff, uncomfortable, and awkward to move. Daily activities, such as dressing or washing, can be difficult. Clothing or jewelry may feel tighter than usual.

Lymphedema has one or more of these symptoms:

- Fullness or heaviness
- Stiffness in the joints
- Tightness and stretching of the skin
- Swelling
- Discomfort or pain or both
- Pitting of the skin
- Infection — painful with redness, increased swelling, or rash.

Occasionally, in more severe lymphedema, the skin may break and the colorless lymph fluid can leak out onto the surface.

SEE YOUR SURGEON IF ANY OF THESE SYMPTOMS APPEAR.

### **How can I prevent and alleviate symptoms?**

You are at risk of developing lymphedema if you have had radiotherapy to your armpit, or if you have had surgery to remove lymph nodes. In certain areas of the body there are clusters of tissues called nodes that filter lymph fluid. The following can help you prevent lymphedema and alleviate any symptoms.

- Do gentle exercise, but do not over-exercise.
- Avoid carrying heavy bags or doing heavy housework with the affected arm.
- Moisturize your skin gently every day with non-perfumed cream or oil.
- Avoid injections in the affected arm.
- Have your blood pressure taken on your unaffected arm.
- Wear gloves for washing dishes and doing other household tasks to avoid cuts.
- If you are stung by an insect on or near the affected area, seek medical advice.
- Avoid cuts and insect bites. Never push back or cut your cuticles. Do not shave the underarm. (You may wax instead.)
- Treat even small grazes and cuts straight away.
- Excess heat can increase the swelling, so try not to have your bath or shower too hot.
- To avoid burns when cooking or baking, wear long sleeves and oven gloves.
- Avoid sunburn on the affected area.
- Keep your weight within a good level as it is more difficult to treat lymphedema if you are overweight.

### **How is lymphedema treated?**

If treated as soon as it develops, the condition can be improved, but it is a long-term problem. Although the swelling can usually be reduced, there is always a risk of it coming back. It may take several weeks or months before you notice any real improvement, but with treatment the affected part of the body should become less swollen, easier to move, and less uncomfortable. If lymphedema has been present for several years, treatment will probably not significantly reduce the swelling.

#### **Arm Elevation**

When sitting, rest your arm and hand on a pillow. Do not raise your arm above the shoulder level, as this may reduce blood flow to the heart and increase discomfort.

#### **Compression Sleeve**

This is a custom-fitted sleeve that applies pressure and helps the fluid drain. A compression sleeve should be worn all day but can usually be taken off at night when you are lying down and resting. A compression sleeve must be properly measured and fitted by a lymphedema specialist.

#### **Manual Lymphatic Drainage**

This involves gentle arm massage to the arm to stimulate the movement of lymphatic fluid. This is done by a trained lymphedema specialist.

### **Follow-up**

It is important to have regular checkups with your lymphedema therapist or doctor so that you can see what progress is being made. The therapist or doctor will measure your arm to monitor the effect of treatment.

You may find it helpful to keep your own progress chart. Progress may be slow, particularly at first, but there should be a noticeable improvement in the arm after a few weeks. If you are worried about any aspect of your treatment, discuss it with your doctor or therapist.