

HELPFUL GUIDELINES TO CONTROLLING LMPHEDEMA OF THE ARM

If you notice a rash, blistering, redness, increase of temperature, fever or chills, or increase in swelling of the arm, hand, fingers, or chest wall see your physician immediately. An inflammation or infection (cellulitis) in the arm could be the beginning, or a worsening of lymphedema. A cellulitis infection can quickly spread and should be treated promptly. Any break in the skin, if left untreated, can cause an infection.

Patients who have lymphedema should wear a well-fitted compression sleeve during all waking hours. If the sleeve is too loose, it is likely that the arm circumference has reduced or the sleeve is worn out. In either case you will need a new sleeve. A well-fitting sleeve is essential for controlling swelling. Wear compression bandages at night as recommended by your therapist.

Keep the affected arm clean. Use lotion (Eucerin, Nivea) regularly after bathing. When drying, be gentle but thorough. It is very important to keep the skin protected. Avoid vigorous, repetitive movements against resistance with the affected arm (scrubbing, pushing, pulling).

Avoid heavy lifting with the affected arm. Never carry heavy handbags or bags with over-the-shoulder straps. Do not lift more than 10 lbs.

Avoid extreme temperature changes when bathing or washing dishes (no sauna or hot tub). Keep the arm protected from the sun. Do not sunbathe, and if possible, try to take vacations in cooler climates. Do not let the affected arm get sunburned. Hot humid weather often exacerbates swelling.

Avoid any type of trauma (bruising, cuts, sunburn or other burns, sports injuries, insect bites, cat/dog scratches). Carry antibiotic cream or ointment with you. Take precautions to avoid insect bites. A simple mosquito bite can cause cellulites and further increase the size of your arm. Wear an insect repellent when outdoors. Clean all injured areas with soap and water and triple antibiotic cream.

When traveling by air wear a compression sleeve. Additional bandage may be required on a long flight. Hand compression is often essential on flights as well.

Patients with large breasts should wear light breast prostheses (heavy prostheses may put too much pressure on the lymph nodes above the collarbone). Soft pads may have to be worn under the bra strap. Wear a well-fitted bra that is not too tight around the middle and has no wire support.

Use an electric razor to remove hair from axilla (armpit). Maintain electric razor, replacing heads as needed. Although straight blades may shave closer, they also have the potential to cut the skin in this area.

Maintain your ideal weight through a well-balanced, low-sodium, high-fiber diet. Avoid smoking and alcoholic beverages. Lymphedema is a high protein edema, but eating too little protein will not reduce the protein element in the lymph fluid; rather, this will weaken the connective tissue and worsen the condition. Your diet should contain protein that is easily digested, such as chicken, fish, and tofu. Drink at least 48 oz of water per day.

When caring for your fingernails, soak your hands first. Push back the cuticle using a washcloth. Manicure your nails carefully using an emery board or clippers instead of scissors. Do not cut the cuticles (inform your manicurist).

Avoid letting your arm hang down for long periods of time, lying on your arm, or keeping your arm in bent position for long periods of time.

When possible, wear natural materials instead of synthetics, which can cause excessive heat and perspiration.

Be careful when doing housework or working in the garden. Do all activities in moderation.

- Avoid sharp, pointed objects such as kitchen knives, scissors or gardening tools
- If you are sewing, wear a thimble to avoid damaging the skin of the finger
- Always wear an oven mitt when removing hot pans from the oven
- Be especially careful not to burn yourself when ironing
- Wear gloves while doing housework, gardening or any work that could result injury

Exercise is important but consult with your therapist. Do not overtire an “at-risk” arm; if it starts to ache, lie down and elevate it. Recommended exercises include specific lymphedema exercises, walking, swimming, light aerobics, bike riding, and especially designed ballet or yoga. Remember to wear your compression sleeve or bandages (except in the pool).

Try to avoid harsh cleaners and chemicals, which could irritate the skin.

If you work in an office, take frequent breaks to stretch and move your arms. Repetitive movements, as at a computer (keyboarding/mouse use), can cause retention of fluids in your arms.

Wristwatches/rings should fit comfortably and not be worn for long periods of time on the affected arm.

Elevate the affected arm at night.

Do your home exercises daily.

Do not allow blood to be drawn or blood pressure taken from the affected arm. Inform all health care personnel that you have lymphedema. It can be helpful to purchase a medical alert bracelet or necklace as a reminder to medical personnel.

If you smoke, do not hold the cigarette with the hand of your affected arm (or better yet quit).

Avoid exposing the affected arm to any of the following:

- Hot packs, moist heat, hot air or short wave treatments, ice packs
- Deep tissue massage
- Cosmetics which could irritate the skin
- Extreme changes in temperature (hot or cold)

Unfortunately, prevention is not a cure. If you are a breast cancer patient, you are in control of your on-going cancer checkups and for the continued maintenance of your lymphedema.