

What is Lymphedema? What can be done about it?
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Pronounced “limf-a-dema”, this condition affects many people who have had surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy during cancer treatment. It can cause fear, anger, and oftentimes sadness. It can be a constant reminder of that patients fight against cancer. But, like the butterfly, it can also be a symbol of that patient’s courage and hope. Even though lymphedema is not curable it is treatable! This week’s talk will be a series of topics about lymphedema. First, we must understand why it occurs.

Lymphedema is a protein rich accumulation of fluid in the area of the body that has been treated for cancer. Lymphedema does not just affect cancer patients; it affects anyone who has had an “assault” to their lymph system. Your body is a complex network of lymph vessels. These vessels are responsible for removing the “dirty” fluid from your body. The lymph collectors bring this fluid through a series of highways to your lymph nodes where it is broken down and moved along further. Eventually, 15% of lymph fluid is excreted via your bladder, and the other 85% is returned to your venous system where it is revitalized and returned throughout your body.

What happens during treatment for different cancers is that essential lymph collectors and lymph nodes can be removed. This lessens the body’s ability to remove this “dirty” fluid. Try to imagine getting one of your children to pick up after another one. Do you ever get resistance? The lymph system is the same way. It only wants to remove so much fluid over a period of time. It gets “lazy”! So, how do you “train” it to do its job again?

The technique referred to as Complete Decongestive Therapy is the “gold star” for treating lymphedema. It has four essential parts: Manual Lymph Drainage (MLD), compression therapy, exercise, and education in skin care. These techniques, individualized for each patient, have the most success in reduction of the symptoms of lymphedema. I also like to take into consideration each patient’s lifestyle and responsibilities when designing a treatment program. As a Certified Lymphedema Therapist, I also look at what stage of lymphedema patients are in at the time of evaluation. Often, all steps are not needed, depending on the person’s response to treatment. Caregiver involvement can be a vital indicator of the patient’s response to treatment.

First, MLD is a gentle massage that is performed in specific directions depending on what is affected by lymphedema. This massage helps the lymph system to “speed up” the rate that the lymph system is pumping. This specialized massage “stretches” the lymph collectors, encourages them to contract, and pump the fluid in the right direction. It is also a way to soften hardened fluid. This is vital. If your “drains” are “clogged”, you must release the collection of fluid in order keep the fluid flowing in the right directions.

Next, Compression can be in the form of multilayer wrap, a compression sleeve, compression hose, or compression garment. A compression garment is not fit until we are sure the patient has had maximal reduction of the fluid accumulation. Sleeves often are issued for prevention of swelling during high risk activities that could onset an episode of swelling. It is still the standard to wear compression during air travel for people who are at risk for swelling. I believe it is always easier to prevent then treat! Education about prevention is a way to prevent symptoms or lessen your risk factors.

Then, good muscle tone helps move lymph fluid! Yes, you should exercise to improve lymph flow. The right exercises with compression can actually improve the return of lymph fluid. Wearing compression while you exercise if you are at risk will reduce your potential for swelling to occur, especially if you have had lymph nodes removed.

Lastly, attentive skin care will help keep the skin pliable and supple. Avoiding products that cause allergies, covering cuts and scrapes, and avoiding sunburns are just a few. We will dive into more specifics on this topic as we progress through the week. I always share with patients the philosophy that having lymphedema, or the potential to have lymphedema, is not a reason to worry about all your activities and stop being active! There are many safe ways to ensure that you have an active lifestyle, but reduce the risk of swelling. Treating the lymphedema is always a good start. When you first notice symptoms, you should seek treatment. Do not wait until it becomes unmanageable.

Prevention, and empowerment by knowledge, can increase your ability to live everyday not worrying about the “what ifs”. Sometimes the simplicity of wearing a graduated compression sock or sleeve during an activity is all you need to do to prevent the symptoms! I look forward to

discussing lymphedema this week. I will break down each of these treatment areas and also giving more specifics on prevention.