

## **Lymphedema and Your Skin!**

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Skin care is very important if you are at risk for or have been diagnosed with lymphedema. Your skin is your barrier to infection. It must respond to stretch and physiological changes that happen during an episode of swelling. In order for your skin to respond to these changes, you must keep it in good condition.

Swelling related to lymphedema can provide a way for infection to occur. The fluid that is trapped under the skin provides a medium for bacteria to quickly grow. We all have different bacteria on our skin. If we scratch or cut an area that is swollen, that bacteria gets “under your skin” and multiplies fast. That, along with people who are immuno-suppressed (i.e. have had lymph node dissections and cancer), will make it harder to fight the infection. So prevention is again very important.

One way to prevent infection is to keep swelling down. If you eliminate the fluid that transports the bacteria, you lessen your chances of getting an infection. This would be accomplished by doing your massage daily (MLD), and wearing prescribed compression garments.

Another way to prevent infection is to keep with you simple topical antibiotic ointment and a band-aid. We recommend that when you first notice a cut or scratch on affected limb, you clean it, apply Bacitracin or Polysporin, and cover with a band-aid. You should avoid the use of hydrogen peroxide or alcohol to clean your skin as these can be “cytotoxic”, meaning they kill the good and bad cells in the wound. We also avoid the use of neomycin based products as these have been found to cause allergic reactions in patients who use them.

Keep your skin soft and supple by using lotions that are hypoallergenic. Look for lotions that have a low ph number. Sometimes this is written on the back of the bottle. Use products that do not contain perfumes. If you do cut or scratch yourself, perfumes can penetrate the skin and cause reactions. Avoid sunburns to the affected area. Repeated sun exposure can damage the skin and decrease elasticity.

Remember all of these things are recommendations. You may have lifestyle issues that make doing them difficult. By educating patients in the reasons behind the recommendation, we allow you to make informed decisions. Remember, skin care is very important to make treatment work more effectively, and prevent infection!

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