

BREAST SURGERY AFTERCARE - LYMPHEDEMA EDUCATION

If lymph nodes from your armpit were removed during surgery, your arm may be at risk for a type of swelling called lymphedema. The risk is reported from 5 to 25% with “full” or completion node dissections. **This risk is much lower when sentinel node biopsy techniques are used.** Lymphedema is caused by the slower flow of protein-rich lymphatic fluid through the armpit region after removal of lymph nodes during surgery. Lymphedema of the arm and hand can occur months to years after surgery. It is different than the usual expected mild swelling that occurs after any injury or surgery. It can also develop if injury or additional treatment (radiation and chemotherapy) slows the flow of fluid in the arm/armpit area. **Lymphedema occurs with multiple events of injury. Some cannot be changed or prevented, but accidental injury can be prevented.**

You will be given a clinically based lymph edema risk before your surgery, and we will work with you to educate and prevent, and treat if necessary. A healthy body weight, good skin care and regular moderate exercise are keys to success.

Please read through the following information and call the office anytime if you have any questions.

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Lymphedema is painless. You may have a feeling of fullness or tightness in the arm, wrist or elbow region, and those areas can look puffy or swollen. Noticeable lymphedema is recognized as swelling of the entire arm circumference that can develop from fingertips to the shoulders. Lymphedema of the breast alone can develop after radiation therapy, especially in very large breasts. Most cases can be cared for with preventive measures such as exercise, therapeutic lymphatic massage and compression garments.

The goals of treatment include mobilizing the fluid and preventing swelling. Active arm exercises maintain tone to the skin and muscles and increase the effectiveness of other treatments. There are specialized massage techniques done by and taught by certified therapists that minimize swelling. Often, a prescription elastic sleeve is used. Other treatment options can be discussed and started as needed. If you develop lymphedema, ask for a referral to a certified lymphedema therapist.

Lymphedema increases your risk of infection from cuts and other injuries. Healthy and intact skin is your best barrier against infection. Practice these precautions early on. Use common sense for the long term.

Recommendations to prevent lymphedema and prevent worsening of symptoms or complications:

- **MAINTAIN GOOD SKIN HEALTH**
 - Wash with mild soap.
 - Use hand and body lotion liberally.
 - Keep skin clean and dry

- **AVOID INJURY AND TRAUMA**
 - Use protective tools/clothing such as mitts, gloves, long sleeves, thimbles to prevent scratches and cuts while gardening, sewing, cooking, interacting with pets, etc. (use common sense, this is not absolute,)

- Clean all cuts with mild soap and water, apply antiseptic ointment and cover with a clean bandage.
 - If you are at high risk, if possible and reasonable, avoid blood pressure checks, blood lab draws and IV's in the operated arm. Use common sense. Multiple sticks are no good. If your best vein is in the operated arm, use it, but be sure the skin is cleansed and the technique is good. Please feel free to request a different technician to do your blood draw if necessary. A sentinel node biopsy maintains most of your nodes, so these precautions may be lightened liberally if you had a sentinel node procedure.
- **CIRCULATION CARE (Mostly for high risk patients).**
 - When resting, try to keep the affected arm above the level of the heart, if you are at high risk or have lymphedema.
 - Avoid extremely hot temperatures (over 104 F) like in saunas and some Jacuzzis.
 - Avoid unsupervised hot packs and heating pads. Never sleep with them and do not use for more than a few minutes. Check the condition of your skin prior to use.
 - Try to carry shoulder strap purse or bags on the other shoulder, if practical.
 - Avoid tight jewelry/rings on the operated side.
 - Avoid clothing that is very tight or with a tight elastic cuff on the operated side.
 - **Maintain your ideal weight. Excess fatty tissues inhibit lymphatic flow. Obesity is an independent risk factor.**
- **ACTIVITY**
 - Weight-bearing exercise after surgery is beneficial for recovery. wait to begin until your doctor feels you are ready and begin with light weights.
 - Slowly and steadily increase your activity level.
 - Do not use your arm to the point of exhaustion.
 - Continue using lymphatic massage techniques on a permanent basis if instructed to do so.