

## Lymphedema Risk Reducing Precautions

The following are strategies to reduce the risk of lymphedema following breast cancer surgery when lymph nodes are removed.

### Skin Care- Prevent Skin Infection

- Perform daily skin care. Keep the affected area clean and dry and apply moisturizer (to prevent skin chapping/chafing).
- Treat scratches, punctures, abrasions, cuts and insect bites by washing with soap and water, then apply a topical antibiotic.
- Do not cut cuticles.
- Inspect the affected area (arm, hand and breast area) daily for changes in size, shape, texture, soreness, heaviness, tightness and firmness.
- Inform a clinician immediately if redness, rash, pain, increased skin temperature, fever or flu-like symptoms occur.
- Wear gloves during activities that could create a skin scratch or puncture (such as gardening or cleaning). If skin is scratched or punctured, wash the area immediately with soap and warm water or alcohol. You could carry alcohol swabs in a purse or handbag to use when you are out.

### Prevent Injury

- Avoid any injections in the affected area. Have any needle sticks/ blood draws done in another area if possible.
- Apply insect repellent to avoid bug bites.
- Apply sunscreen on the affected area to avoid a sunburn.
- Use caution when cooking to avoid splashes or steam burns. Use oven mitts.

### Activity/ Lifestyle

- Exercise regularly with a combination of activities including strength, flexibility and endurance exercises. Gradually build up the duration and intensity of any activity or exercise.
- Consider wearing a supportive compression garment when doing any vigorous or strenuous activity, including weight-lifting/strength training.
- Take frequent rest periods during activity to allow for arm recovery.
- Monitor the extremity during and after activity for any change in size, shape, tissue, texture, soreness, heaviness or firmness.
- Maintain optimal weight – there is an associated increased risk of lymphedema when being overweight.
- Avoid overusing the affected arm without wearing a compression garment for support.
- Rest the affected arm if it feels tired or aches. Elevating the arm helps.

## Avoid Compression/Restriction of the Affected Side

- Avoid having blood pressures measured on the affected arm.
- Wear a well-fitted bra without underwires or straps too tight at top of shoulder.
- Choose a lightweight breast prosthesis.
- Wear loose-fitting jewelry and clothing.
- Avoid using bags with shoulder straps on the affected side to minimize compression of the lymphatic system.

## Avoid Excessive Temperature- Heat and Cold

- Avoid prolonged (greater than 15minutes) exposure to heat (such as hot tubs or saunas). In very hot climates, use a spray bottle to cool off and drink water frequently.
- Avoid immersing the affected arm in hot water (above 102°F).
- Cover the involved arm and hand with protective clothing when exposed to extreme cold, which can be associated with rebound swelling or chapping of skin.

## Compression Garments

- Compression sleeves should be well fitted. Measurements are taken to ensure an appropriate fit for your arm by a licensed fitter at a medial supply store. Sleeves may need to be worn with a gauntlet to avoid hand or finger swelling.
- Wear a compression garment for strenuous activity.
- Wear a compression garment for air travel.

**Please Note: Some of the earliest signs of lymphedema are not actual swelling of the affected hand, arm or breast, but a feeling of “heaviness” or “tightness” in the area.** If you suspect your arm or breast area might be swollen, it is important to not ignore it and see a clinician for assessment. You can access our Lymphedema Program at Sports Plus Rehab Centers – 731-855-7984 or Lift Therapy, Inc – 731-421-6950 if you have any questions. You need an MD order to see a physical therapist.

The above information is from Fu et al. American Journal of Nursing (2009), Schmitz et al. New England Journal of Medicine (2009), National Lymphedema Network (<http://www.lymphnet.org/lymphedemaFAQs/riskReduction/riskReduction.htm>), and National Cancer Institute(<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/supportivecare/lymphedema>). Given that there is still an ongoing need for evidence-based literature regarding many of these suggested practices, the majority of the recommendations are based on the knowledge of pathophysiology and decades of clinical experience by experts in the field.