Patient Education Sheet

Lymphedema Risk Reduction for Patients with Breast Cancer

What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is an abnormal build up of lymph fluid between the skin and muscle, causing swelling.

What causes lymphedema?

Lymphedema most often occurs when the lymphatic system is unable to function properly. The lymphatic system is a drainage network that helps keep body fluid levels in balance and defends the body against infection. Removal of lymph nodes during surgery for breast cancer or radiation to the under-arm area increases the chance of developing lymphedema in the arm on the side of the breast cancer.

Will I get lymphedema?

Doctors do not know who will go on to develop lymphedema. Having just a few lymph nodes removed, as in a sentinel lymph node sampling, is less likely to cause lymphedema than having many nodes removed. Sentinel lymph node sampling is a technique in which a dye is injected in the affected area to pinpoint the lymph node(s) closest to the cancer site, and to remove just that node(s). The other nodes are left behind to continue their important job of draining fluids.

The addition of radiation may also further increase the risk. About 20%, or 1 in 5 of those who have many lymph nodes removed may develop lymphedema. That number is reduced to about 5-10% for those who have sentinel lymph node sampling.

When does lymphedema occur?

Lymphedema can occur any time after lymph nodes have been removed. Most often swelling occurs within the first year following breast cancer treatment, however some people have developed lymphedema as many as 30 years after treatment.

What are the signs and symptoms of lymphedema?

Signs and symptoms may include:

- Swelling of the hand or arm
- Aching, burning, tingling or a feeling of heaviness in the hand or arm
- Tightness of clothes or jewelry
- Less movement or flexibility in the hand or wrist

If any of these symptoms develop notify your doctor immediately. Early detection and management of lymphedema is very important and can reduce its severity.

Can lymphedema be prevented?

Evidence suggests that breast cancer patients who take special care of their affected arm *may be* less likely to develop lymphedema.

What can I do to reduce my risk of developing lymphedema?

Most experts suggest that incorporating the basic steps below into your daily routine may help to reduce your risk of developing lymphedema.

Skin Care

- Keep the affected arm clean and dry
- Apply moisturizer daily to prevent chapping or chafing of skin
- Pay particular attention to nail care and do not cut cuticles
- Protect exposed skin with sunscreen and insect repellant

Skin Care Cont.

- Use care with razors to avoid nicks and skin irritations
- If possible, avoid punctures, such as injections and blood draws
- Wear gloves for activities that may cause skin injury (e.g., washing dishes, gardening, working with tools, using chemicals such as detergent)
- If scratches/punctures to the skin occur, wash with soap and water, apply antibiotic ointments as suggested by your physician, and observe for signs of infections (e.g. redness)
- If you develop a rash, itching, redness, pain, increased skin temperature, fever or flu-like symptoms, contact your physician immediately for early treatment of possible infection
- Avoid prolonged (more than 15 minutes) exposure to extreme cold or heat (e.g. hot tubs and saunas). Do not submerge the arm in water temperatures above 102 degrees.

Activity/Lifestyle

- Gradually build up the duration and intensity of any activity or exercise
- Take frequent rest periods during activity to allow for limb recovery
- Monitor your arm and hand during and after activity for any change in size, shape, tissue, texture, soreness, heaviness, or firmness
- Maintain optimal weight

Avoiding Limb Constriction

- If possible, avoid having blood pressure taken on the surgical arm
- Wear loose fitting clothing and jewelry
- Avoid carrying heavy handbags or pulling suitcases with surgical arm

Compression Garments

Speak to your physician regarding the need for compression garments, as they may be needed during air travel.

Are there specialists for lymphedema?

Danbury Hospital's Rehabilitation Department (203-730-5900) has occupational therapists who are specially trained in lymphedema prevention and management. A referral from your physician is required.

Additional Resources

The following web sites have additional information on lymphedema:

- National Lymphedema Network (800-541-3259) www.lymphnet.org
- National Cancer Institute (800-4-CANCER) www.cancer.gov
- American Cancer Society (800-ACS-2345) www.cancer.org

For questions or additional information, please contact:

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Sources:
The American Cancer Society @ www.cancer.org

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