

Everything I Wish I Had Known... About Lymphedema

If you have been diagnosed with lymphedema following cancer treatment, here are some helpful tips.

1. Lymphedema is swelling caused by a disruption in your lymphatic system, creating a build-up of lymph fluid. The lymph system is a network of vessels just under your skin, and the lymph fluid plays an important role in your body's ability to fight infection and disease. Sometimes people who undergo cancer treatments develop secondary lymphedema when surgery and/or radiation damages the lymph system, especially when lymph nodes are removed. Not all people develop lymphedema, and it may occur immediately following treatment or many years later. Women who undergo breast and gynecological cancer surgery are especially at-risk for developing lymphedema. There is no cure for lymphedema, but treatments can improve daily functioning, reduce discomfort, and prevent infection.
2. Common symptoms of lymphedema include swelling, discomfort and heaviness in the affected area, and skin issues, ranging from mild to severe. The most common affected areas are arms, legs and trunk. Swelling may cause an enlarged appearance; red or puffy skin; tightness in joints; burning, itching or pinching feelings; tightness of clothing and jewelry; and skin that feels thicker. If you see any of these symptoms, ask your physician for a referral to a certified lymphedema specialist for evaluation. Early intervention offers the best outcomes.
3. Lymphedema intervention involves a comprehensive approach. The first step is an evaluation with a certified lymphedema specialist, typically a physical therapist (PT) with an oncology rehabilitation program. The PT will design your treatment program, which may include hands-on Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD), instruction on continuing MLD at home, compression, exercises and precautions.
 - MLD is a specialized massage technique that uses gentle, rhythmic hand movements to stimulate the flow of lymph fluid, helping to reduce swelling and relieve pain.
 - Compression garments such as sleeves, gloves, stockings and vests, are prescribed to be worn on the affected area. Compression garments are especially important to wear when flying. These products may be covered by medical insurance and are also available for direct purchase online and in medical supply stores. <http://www.lymphedemaproducts.com>; <http://ameswalker.com>
 - Exercises prescribed by the PT will help improve your strength, balance and range of motion.
 - The PT will give you a list of precautions. Because lymphedema increases the risk of cellulitis, a serious skin infection, you should keep your skin moisturized to reduce dryness and cracking. Any injury, including chapped hands, bug bites, cuts, scrapes or sunburn has the potential to cause an infection. Clean and cover all abrasions on the skin of the affected area, using an antibiotic ointment and adhesive bandage (Band-Aid). Do not allow blood pressure readings, injections, blood draws or IVs in your affected limb.
 - If you will have limited access to medical support when traveling, ask your doctor for an emergency supply of antibiotics to take with you; a skin infection can develop rapidly. Signs of infection include redness and/or splotchy skin, warmth, swelling and pain.
 - High heat, including saunas, hot springs and hot tubs, may exacerbate lymphedema

4. Cording and lymphedema are often confused with each another and both may occur as a result of surgery that disrupts lymph nodes. Cording appears as rope-like cords that develop under the skin in the armpit area following breast surgery. It is often confused with scar tissue. However, cording develops along lymphatic vessels and beyond the surgical scar. Cording causes tightness and pain that restricts movement in the arm, even before a cord is visible. Lymphedema and cording and do not appear to be connected and cording does not lead to lymphedema. It is important to tell your physician about any symptoms you experience so that you can be referred to an oncology PT. Cording can be treated and resolved with stretching and massage techniques that soften the cord. Untreated cording can result in long-term pain and immobility.

Additional information is available in our **Everything I Wish I Would Have Known...** series on the website.

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