

# HELPFUL GUIDELINES TO CONTROLLING LYMPHEDEMA OF THE ARM

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## WHO IS AT RISK?

*At risk is anyone who has had either a simple mastectomy, lumpectomy or modified radical mastectomy in combination with axillary node dissection and, often, radiation therapy. Lymphedema can occur immediately postoperatively, within a few months, a couple of years, or 20 years or more after cancer therapy. With proper education and care, lymphedema can sometimes be avoided or if it develops, kept well under control.*

*The following instructions should be reviewed carefully pre-operatively and discussed with your physician or therapist.*

## DO:

- Consult your doctor immediately if you notice even a slight increase or swelling in the arm, hand, fingers, or chest wall.
- Keep the at-risk” arm spotlessly clean. Use lotion (Eucerin, Nivea) regularly after bathing. When drying it, be gentle but thorough. It is very important to keep the skin supple and moist.
- Avoid vigorous, repetitive movements against resistance with the affected arm (scrubbing, pushing, and pulling).
- Avoid heavy lifting with the affected arm. Use caution when carrying heavy handbags or bags with over-the-shoulder straps. **DO NOT** lift more than 10 lbs.
- Avoid extreme temperature changes when bathing or washing dishes (no sauna or hot tub). Keep the arm protected from the sun.
- Avoid any type of trauma (bruising, cuts, sunburn or other burns, sports injuries, insect bites, cat scratches). Carry antibiotic cream or ointment with you.
- When traveling by air, wear a compression sleeve. Additional bandage may be required on a long flight. Hand compression is often essential on flights as well.
- Large breasted women should wear light breast prostheses (heavy prostheses may put too much pressure on the lymph nodes above the collar bone). Soft pads may have to be worn under the bra strap. Wear a well-fitted bra that is not too tight around the middle.
- Use an electric razor to remove hair from axilla (armpit). Maintain the electric razor properly, replacing heads as needed. Although blades may shave closer, they also have the potential to cut the skin in this area.
- Wear a well-fitted compression sleeve during all waking hours. If the sleeve is too loose, most likely the arm circumference has reduced or the sleeve is worn. A compression

bandage should be worn at night. A well-fitting sleeve is essential in controlling swelling.

**WARNING:**

*If you notice a rash, blistering, redness, increase of temperature, fever or chills, see your physician immediately. An inflammation or infection (cellulites) in the arm could be the beginning of lymphedema or a worsening of lymphedema. A cellulites infection can quickly spread and should be treated quickly.*

- Maintain your ideal weight through a well-balanced, low-sodium, high-fiber diet. Avoid smoking and drink alcoholic beverages in moderation. Lymphedema is a high protein edema, but eating too little protein will not reduce the protein element in the lymph fluid; rather, this will weaken the connective tissue and worsen the condition. The diet should contain protein that is easily digested, such as chicken, fish, and tofu. Drink at least 48 ounces of water per day.
- When caring for your fingernails, soak your hands first. If desired, push back the cuticle using a washcloth. Manicure your nails carefully using an emery board or clippers instead of scissors. Do not cut the cuticles (inform your manicurist).
- Avoid letting your arm hang down for long periods of time.
- Avoid lying on your arms or keeping your arm in bent position for long periods of time.
- When possible, wear natural materials instead of synthetics, which cause excessive heat and perspiration.
- Be careful when doing housework or working in the garden. Do all activities in moderation.
  - Be cautious with sharp, pointed objects such as kitchen knives, scissors or gardening tools.
  - If you are sewing, wear a thimble to avoid damaging the skin of the finger.
  - Always wear an oven mitt when removing hot pans from the oven.
  - Be especially careful not to burn yourself when ironing.
  - Wear gloves while doing housework, gardening or any type of work that could result in even a mild injury.
- Exercise is important, but consult with your therapist. Do not overtire an “at-risk” arm; if it starts to ache, lie down and elevate it. Recommended exercises include walking, swimming, light aerobics, and bike riding.
- Wear rubber gloves with using harsh cleaners and chemicals, which could irritate the skin.

- Use caution when playing with pets. Scratches and bites can become infected.
- Take precautions to avoid insect bites. A simple mosquito bite can cause cellulites (erysipelas) and further increase the size of your arm. Wear an insect repellent when outdoors.
- If you work in an office, take frequent breaks to stretch and move your arms. Repetitive movements, as at a computer or typewriter, can cause retention of fluids in your arms.
- Wristwatches and rings should fit comfortably.
- When possible elevate the affected arm at night.
- Do your home exercises daily.

### **DO NOT:**

- **Do not allow blood to be drawn or blood pressure taken from the affected arm. Inform all health care personnel that you have lymphedema.**
- If you smoke, do not hold the cigarette with the hand of your affected arm, or better yet quit.
- The affected arm should not be exposed to:
  - hot packs, moist heat, hot air or short wave treatments, ice packs, or hot wax
  - deep tissue massage
  - hot tubs and saunas
- Do not sunbathe, and if possible, try to take vacations in cooler climates. Hot humid weather often exacerbates swelling.

**REMEMBER: Any break in the skin, if left untreated, can cause an infection. If you notice a rash, blistering, redness, increase of temperature, fever or chills, see your physician immediately. An inflammation or infection (cellulites) in the arm can quickly spread and should be treated promptly.**

*Unfortunately, prevention is not a cure. But, if you are a breast cancer patient, you are in control of your on-going cancer checkups and for the continued maintenance of your lymphedema.*

**For additional information:**

National Lymphedema Network - [www.lymphnet.org/](http://www.lymphnet.org/)