

Training Tip #20 Lymphedema

Lymphedema is an accumulation of lymphatic fluid in tissue and presents as swelling to the upper extremity. It typically occurs after breast cancer treatments where lymph nodes or vessels are damaged or removed. It can develop at any time; weeks, months or even years later. Stressful conditions, such as an increase in exercise, can cause it to occur.

Signs can include a full/heavy sensation in the arm, skin feeling tight, hand or elbow pain, skin discoloration, decreased hand or wrist flexibility, difficulty fitting into clothing in one specific area or ring/watch/bracelet tightness. Swelling may develop at any part of the extremity. Seek medical attention as soon as you notice any of these symptoms.

Skin care is important to decrease the risk of infection. If you notice redness, warmth, swelling or tenderness to the skin, seek medical care at once. This is even more important if you have diabetes. Tips for skin care include:

- Keep skin moisturized and clean. Moisturize frequently and do not use harsh soaps.
- Take frequent breaks and rest when doing vigorous activities, especially if your arm feels tired, heavy or achy.
- Use an electric razor instead of a safety razor.
- Use insect repellants that do not dry the skin. Avoid those that contain a significant amount of alcohol.
- Use sunscreen with SPF factor 15 or higher. Reapply often.
- Apply antibiotic ointment to insect bites, cuts or abrasions (as long as you are not allergic).
- Rest your arm in an elevated position, but do not hold it up for a long time without support so that your muscles will not get tired.
- If you have arm swelling, wear compression bandages or garments and glove as instructed by your health care provider. Bring one or two spare sets with you on the Susan G. Komen 3-Day®.
- If you have a history of infections, use antibiotics as directed by your personal physician.
- Don't carry heavy objects or wear heavy shoulder bags on your affected side.
- Don't wear your watch or jewelry on your affected side.
- Don't wear clothing that restricts movement or has tight sleeves.
- Don't smoke or drink too much alcohol.
- Don't get manicures that cut or overstress the skin around the nails.
- Don't permit blood pressure testing or any type of puncture (injection, IVs, drawing of blood or vaccinations) to your affected arm.