

Lymphedema Prevention and Treatment for the Arm

Lymphedema is swelling that occurs when fluid drained by the lymph vessels does not flow out of the arm and hand on the side of your surgery. This swelling may occur when some of the lymph nodes under the arm have been removed during surgery or treated with radiation, or when cancer has spread to these lymph nodes.

When the lymph system does not drain properly, the arm is at risk for developing lymphedema. Although it is not always clear why some persons have swelling and others do not, it is sometimes related to infection, injury or trauma involving the arm. Lymphedema can occur even years after surgery or radiation treatment and may not necessarily be related to a recurrence of cancer.

With modern improvements to surgery and radiation therapy, lymphedema is less likely to occur than in the past. Although most patients have a low risk of developing lymphedema, it is important for you to be aware of this condition and what you can do to prevent it.

If you notice any swelling in your arm or hand, call your physician or your Care Center **as soon as possible**. You may be referred to the Rehabilitation Services Department for the management of lymphedema. Early treatment is important in preventing problems.

Steps to Help Lymph Drainage

There are some practical steps you can take to promote good lymph drainage:

- 1. Maintain full active range of motion in the arm on the side of your surgery.**
 - You may help drainage by doing the exercises you have been given. These exercises are designed to help you achieve full range of motion of your shoulder.
- 2. Prevent trapping more fluid in the arm on the side of your surgery.**
 - When having your blood pressure taken, use the opposite arm. If both sides have been treated, ask your doctor for advice.
 - Do** wear loose-fitting jewelry or watches with adjustable bands on the affected arm.
 - Do not** wear tight or elastic shirt sleeves.
 - Do** wear properly fitted bras to avoid trapping fluid in the chest wall and arm.
- 3. Avoid carrying heavy objects, moving heavy furniture, or doing other activities that require excessive force or strain of the arm on the side of your surgery.**

To prevent lymphedema during long car/bus trips or airplane flights:

- Drink plenty of water
- Stand and/or stretch when it is safe to do so
- Do arm and breathing exercises every 2 hours
- Elevate the arm with pillows

Infection and Injury Precautions

Infection or injuries may trigger the onset of lymphedema. Lymphedema may become more severe if your hand or arm is infected or injured. Take the following precautions to help prevent infection or injury:

- **Avoid using the arm when receiving vaccinations or injections or when having blood drawn.** There will be times when you will need to use the arm on the side of your surgery. If you have questions about using your arm, ask your doctor.
- **Avoid excessive heat, such as saunas, whirlpool spas, or extremely hot showers. Keep the arm cool in hot weather by:**
 - not sunbathing
 - staying in air-conditioned places
 - placing the arm under cool running water
 - placing cool towels over the arm
- **Prevent burns to the arm.**
 - Use long padded mitts near the oven, grill, or fireplace.
 - Protect the arm from sunburn by using a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15 or higher and by wearing long sleeves.
- **Avoid cuts and scratches to the hand and arm.**
 - Use an electric shaver when shaving under the arm to prevent razor cuts.
 - Wear heavy gloves and long-sleeved shirts while doing work (such as gardening) that may cause scratches or cuts.
 - Use a thimble to protect against puncture wounds while sewing.
 - Use a cutting board while chopping or slicing foods.
 - Avoid shelling shrimp or crawfish with your bare hands. Use heavy duty gloves that can not be punctured by the sharp points of the shrimp or crawfish.
 - Use insect spray to help prevent insect bites.
 - Take care of any cuts, burns, insect bites and scrapes immediately. Wash them thoroughly, apply an antibacterial ointment and cover with a bandage to protect the site from further injury.
- **Avoid harsh detergents or deodorants.**
 - Wear rubber gloves if your hands will be in water for an extended length of time or in contact with harsh chemicals (such as cleaning solutions).
- **Keep hands and cuticles soft.**
 - Apply a moisturizing lotion after washing to prevent your hand from becoming chapped, dry, or cracked.
 - **Do not** cut the cuticle on your hand. Use cuticle softener cream and gently ease the cuticle back with a cotton-tipped swab.

- Keep your nail edges smooth and do not bite your fingernails.
- Use your own instruments when you get a manicure.
- Check your fingernails for signs of a fungal infection (i.e., discoloration, thickening, crumbling edges, or cracks).
- Call your doctor if your nails become infected.

If you begin to develop lymphedema, contact your doctor for a referral to Physical Therapy for lymphedema management. To manage lymphedema, physical therapists can provide a comprehensive program that includes education, specific exercises, compression bandaging, manual lymphatic drainage therapy, and fitting of custom compression garments.



Call your doctor **immediately** if your arm, chest wall, or hand shows signs of infection:

- Red streaks on the arm or chest wall
- Red, warm, or unusually hard, swollen, or painful arm, hand or chest wall
- A feeling of heaviness or constant aching in the arm or chest wall
- Elevated body temperature (fever)

For more information, call the **Rehabilitation Services Department** at 713-792-3192.