



Lymphedema Treatment

By Dawn Bonness, Physical Therapist and Natasha Stava, Physical Therapist Assistant

Lymphedema is swelling of a limb that can occur after cancer surgery with lymph node removal, after radiation, after injury or for no known reason. The onset of lymphedema may happen any time after surgery or trauma. Symptoms of lymphedema include; swelling of an extremity, decreased motion in a limb, difficulty fitting into clothing, repeated infections, heaviness of a limb, and aching or tightness of an extremity.

People who have this chronic condition or those who are at risk for developing lymphedema should adhere to the following precautions: no needle/IV pokes into the affected extremity, no blood pressures taken on the affected limb, keep skin clean and dry it thoroughly after bathing, keep skin soft by using good lotion, bathe in warm water instead of hot or cold, use an electric razor for shaving, use basic first aid on minor injuries to prevent infection.

Treatment of lymphedema includes specialized exercise, skin care, bandaging and compression, and manual lymphatic drainage. Manual lymphatic drainage is a gentle massage-like technique that improves fluid movement in the body. Bandaging and compression helps keep fluid from moving back into the limb. The goal of lymphedema therapy is to reduce the size of the swollen extremity and have a person fit with the appropriate compression garment to control the size of the limb. After therapy, it is recommended that people wear the compression garments on a daily basis.

There are some people who are not appropriate candidates for the manual lymphatic drainage part of treatment. This includes people with untreated cancer, cardiac edema, current infections, and blood clots.

It is estimated that there are 2.5 million cases of secondary lymphedema in the United States. The majority of cases are caused by breast cancer. If left untreated, lymphedema may worsen over time. If you feel you have this condition or know someone who may, contact your physician for a referral to a certified lymphedema therapist in your area.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS: Dawn Bonness, PT and Natasha Stava, PTA are both Certified Lymphedema Therapists. They have had extensive training in the treatment of this chronic condition, with combined experience of 12 years. Dawn and Natasha work at Midwest Physical Therapy and Sports Center in Lincoln, Nebraska.

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