

Lymphedema Screening - For Breast Cancer Patients

Lymphedema is swelling of the arm, hand, upper back or chest. It occurs when fluid, drained by the lymph vessels, does not flow out of an arm or the chest. This swelling may occur when some or all of the lymph nodes have been removed, treated with radiation or the cancer has spread to the lymph nodes.

Lymphedema can be painful. It may cause clothes and jewelry to not fit well. It may also increase your risk for skin infections of the arm. If you develop a skin infection, you will need to have it treated by a doctor.

Most patients have a low risk of developing lymphedema. However, it is important to know about this condition and what you can do to prevent it.

Benefits of Lymphedema Screening

- Early detection allows for early treatment. Early treatment can prevent or slow the progression of it becoming a chronic, harder to treat state.
- Most people naturally have a difference in the size of their arms; it is important to measure before any surgery to get a baseline measurement.

Lymphedema Screening

- Each arm is measured using a perometer, a machine that uses infrared technology. This is not painful and takes about 5 minutes.
- Measurements will be taken again with follow up visits as needed
- Your healthcare team will inform you of any notable changes. You may need a referral for physical therapy treatments.

Preventing Lymphedema

Report to your doctor, right away, any feelings of:

- Heaviness, tightness, swelling or redness
- Heat in the arm, chest or breast on the side of your cancer
- Avoid trauma and injury to the affected arm to reduce the risk of infection.

Maintain an active lifestyle:

- Exercise your arm
- Follow your doctor's advice about exercise after surgery.
- Maintain a healthy weight. Obesity or being overweight is a major risk factor for lymphedema.
- Avoid extreme heat and/or cold
- Avoid pressure to the arm on the side of your surgery.

If possible, do not:

- Allow your blood pressure to be taken using that arm
- Wear tight jewelry or carry heavy bags or purses

References

NLN Medical Advisory Committee. Position Statement of the National Lymphedema Network. Topic: Screening and Measurement for Early Detection of Breast Cancer Related Lymphedema. December 2013. <http://lymphnet.org/pdfDocs/nlnBCLE.pdf>