

UNDERSTANDING LYMPHOEDEMA



WHAT IS LYMPHOEDEMA?

Lymphoedema is a chronic swelling of part of the body that can occur after treatment for cancer.

There are lymph nodes all around the body including the armpit, groin, abdomen, chest and neck.

Lymphatic vessels carry the lymph fluid to lymph nodes where harmful bacteria are filtered out and destroyed. This helps to protect the body from infection.

Surgery or radiotherapy can damage the lymph nodes and this can stop the lymph fluid from flowing through the body. This causes the swelling that is lymphoedema.

Lymphoedema usually develops slowly and can appear months or years after treatment for cancer.

Lymphoedema is not the same as the swelling and pain that follows immediately after surgery or radiotherapy.

REDUCING THE RISK OF LYMPHOEDEMA

It is not possible to tell who will develop lymphoedema after cancer treatment.

There are some actions that may help to reduce the risk of developing lymphoedema:

- Use moisturiser regularly to prevent dryness.
- Take precautions to avoid cuts, sunburn or burns to the affected area.
- Avoid hot baths, spas and saunas.
- Keep a healthy weight and stay active.
- Elevate and exercise the affected limb when travelling long distances.





It is important to use your affected arm, leg or neck as normally as possible and to keep your skin healthy to prevent infection, as any infection may cause or worsen lymphoedema.

As a precaution, whenever possible, use the unaffected limb for blood samples, injections, intravenous drips and blood pressure monitoring. It is currently unknown whether these procedures increase the risk of lymphoedema.

WHAT ARE THE EARLY SIGNS OF LYMPHOEDEMA?

Early signs of lymphoedema to look for include:

- a feeling of heaviness, tightness or fullness in the limb
- swelling (you may notice indentations in the skin from tight clothing, jewellery or shoes)
- ache, pain or tension in the limb.

Some of these early signs may come and go. If you notice one or more of the changes above, you should discuss these with your doctor.

HOW IS LYMPHOEDEMA MANAGED?

The aim of management is to reduce and control swelling, improve the range of movement of the affected area and prevent infection.

There is no known cure for lymphoedema, however the symptoms can be reduced with appropriate care.

Treatment options can include skin care, gentle exercises, special massage and compression garments.

A qualified lymphoedema practitioner may be able to help. Ask your doctor for a referral.

For more information go to www.nbocc.org.au

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