What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is an abnormal accumulation of lymph fluid within the tissue spaces of the body. It develops as a result of lymph node surgery (axillary node dissection or sentinel node biopsy) and or radiation therapy. While newer surgical techniques such as sentinel node biopsy reduce the risk of developing lymphedema, it does not eliminate the risk.

Unfortunately, lymphedema is a permanent condition. However, with early intervention the risk of developing lymphedema may be decreased. In many cases, the onset of the lymphedema can be delayed and if lymphedema develops, the amount can be minimized.

Treatment of lymphedema

Lymphedema can be successfully treated and managed with proper therapy. Therapy includes the use of multi-layer compression bandages, manual lymph drainage, exercise, and skin care with progression to a compression garment. In some cases, a lymphedema pump can be utilized. Therapy sessions range in number of visits and intensity of treatment based on the amount of swelling present. With early intervention, the number of treatment visits can be minimized.

What does the early intervention program entail?

A referral to physical therapy is the first step followed with a PT evaluation. Initial circumferential measurements or volumetric water displacement measurements are taken at the evaluation. It is very important to obtain baseline objective measurements in order to compare in the future if lymphedema develops, is already present, or if it decreases with treatment.

Goals of early intervention

The goal of this program is to remove the fear of developing lymphedema and educate cancer survivors that even if lymphedema does develop, physical therapy can reduce the lymphedema. The therapist will assist the individual in establishing an independent management program.
LYMPHEDEMA RISK REDUCTION PROGRAM

Components of treatment
There are several key physiological factors to optimize lymph flow and detect the earliest onset of swelling. They include the following:

1. Regaining full range of motion of the entire limb. Full motion and function of the limb helps to promote lymph flow.
2. Strengthening the muscles of the entire limb. Strong muscles act as a pump to move lymph fluid.
3. Mobilizing and normalizing scar tissue. Scars from the cancer surgeries impede lymph flow. Therefore, it is important to perform scar mobilizations to improve lymph flow in the areas surrounding the incisions.

In addition, your physical therapist will develop an individualized home program, including:

1. A self-lymphatic drainage program. This is a very simple home program that can be performed 1-2X daily and only takes about 15 minutes. A family member can also be instructed to perform this self-massage, if necessary.
2. A lymph drainage exercise program. The exercises are simple range of motion exercises and proper breathing exercises that promote lymph flow and can be completed in about 15 mins.
3. A home walking program. Walking is a gentle and efficient method to stimulate the diaphragm via deep breathing, stimulate the lymph vessels in the trunk as the trunk rotates and encourages arm swing during normal walking. Walking will not only assist in mobilizing lymph fluid but also helps in minimizing the de-conditioning effects from cancer surgery.
4. Lastly, your physical therapist will educate you on the early signs and symptoms of lymphedema, all the potential treatment options, and skin care. Education regarding skin care is important, as keeping the skin well moisturized helps to prevent infection, which is a critical goal of lymphedema management.

Quality of Life

While lymphedema can be overwhelming, with proper treatment, early intervention and education, the physical therapist will assist the individual in achieving their highest level of function. We will work with you to regain your “pre-cancer” physical activities. While there may need to be some modifications, most individuals with lymphedema can live a full active lifestyle.