



LYMPHEDEMA SELF-CARE AND PRECAUTIONS

According to studies 20% to 50% of breast cancer survivors develop some symptoms of lymphedema. Here are some precautions from the National Lymphedema Network, Stanford Lymphedema Center, and my experience in the field since 1987. These simple precautions, combined with self-MLD (manual lymph drainage) create new lymph pathways and help in the prevention and maintenance of lymphedema.

1. Absolutely do not ignore a slight increase in swelling of the arm, hand, fingers, or chest wall. See your MD. Often lymphedema begins with a slight swelling going up and down. This is a reversible stage. Take a self-MLD class and develop self-care tools before swelling sets in.
2. Ask for injections and blood draws in the unaffected side.
3. Ask for blood pressure checks on the unaffected side or on your leg.
4. Repetitive movements against resistance (pulling, pushing, scrubbing, window washing) can cause an increase in swelling. If your arm feels heavy and achy – STOP and elevate. Work 10-20 minutes with a 5-10 minute rest. Use the other arm to vacuum or delegate – ask a family member to do the work.
5. Avoid carrying heavy things with the arm at risk. Carry grocery bags close to the body. Use a light purse on the other shoulder.
6. Wear jewelry, watches, and rings on the unaffected side.
7. Extreme hot or cold can cause swelling. You may need to avoid saunas, keep your arm out in the hot tub, and try shorter times (5-10 minutes). If your arm becomes heavy, do the self-MLD and maybe avoid hot tubs.
8. Keep the skin hydrated daily to avoid chafing and cracks that increase the risk of cellulitis infection. Curel® lotion soaks in and does not cause a build-up on the skin. Some people like Aveeno® lotion. Ph balanced is best, but not Eucerin® – it leaves a build-up on the skin.
9. Protect yourself from cuts, burns, insect bites, and sunburn (use sun block clothing or sunscreen). Wear gloves for yard work and avoid thorny plants. For wounds: wash with warm water and soap, apply Duoderm® or Replicare® (obtain from pharmacy), cut piece ½” larger than the wound, leave on for 4 days to protect. You can wear it in the shower and then pat dry. This keeps the wound clean and allows it to heal and granulate faster. – **OR** – use antibiotic cream and a bandaid.
10. Develop the habit of elevating your arm when sitting for long periods such as watching TV, long car trips, meetings. Put a pillow on your lap.
11. Do not sleep with the at risk arm folded under your head or pillow. This decreases circulation. Bending the arm past 90° can decrease circulation and cause swelling.
12. Talk on the phone with a headset or hold the phone on the unaffected side.
13. For air travel you may wish to wear a well-fit sleeve (well fit: fit 1 or 2 fingers at the wrist and axilla area – not too tight). Put the sleeve on 1-2 hours before the flight and leave on for 1-2 hours after the flight. Research shows it is more advantageous to do self-MLD on a flight, if you do not have lymphedema.
14. Avoid cutting cuticles in a manicure.
15. Recommended exercises are Strength ABC exercises, swimming, walking, biking, yoga, and light aerobics. Be careful with weights – don't go over 12 pounds. For yoga, be careful with full weight bearing like downward dog. You may need to modify. If your arm feels heavy or achy – STOP and modify. Rest every 20 minutes for 6-10 minutes. Be careful not to bend past 90° in weights.
16. Use electric razors in armpits in order to avoid cuts.
17. Check your prosthesis. Heavy prosthesis may put excessive pressure on remaining lymph system. Obtain a light prosthesis or a tank top with pockets for the prosthesis. You can make your own from polyfill, birdseed, lace, etc.
18. Check for binding from bra or straps trapping fluid in the arm or breast, causing overhang in the armpit. Use a well-fitting sports bra or post-mastectomy bra with wide straps and no underwire. Take off bra when possible.
19. Be alert for signs of itchiness (inside), redness, rash, swelling, marked tenderness to the touch, blotchy area(s), unusually warm to the touch, red streak, achiness, or pain. These are signs of a cellulitis infection. Call your doctor for antibiotics. Some people carry antibiotics in their purse prophylactically. Cephalexin, Keflex, and Cipro are the most commonly used antibiotics.
20. Salt and wine can increase swelling. Check to see if this is affecting you.
21. Eat Healthy! A well-balanced diet with fiber, colorful fruits and vegetables, 2-4 oz. of protein twice per day, and water!!!
22. Keep regular checkups with your doctor.

