



Lymphedema

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An estimated 2.5 million people in the United States suffer from lymphedema. Lymphedema is a protein-rich swelling of a body part, usually an extremity, due to an abnormal accumulation of lymph fluid. The basic purpose of the lymphatic system, besides its role in immune defense, is to drain substances from the fatty tissues just underneath the skin back into the blood system. Lymphedema often causes a feeling of heaviness, slight discomfort, decreased flexibility in the affected extremities, persistent swelling, cosmetic deformity, repeated episodes of infection, and, in rare cases, malignancies.

There are two types of lymphedema: primary and secondary. Primary lymphedema is a congenital condition in which lymph nodes and lymph vessels are absent or abnormal. Primary lymphedema is more common in females and occurs more often in the lower extremities. Secondary lymphedema may occur by injury, scarring, or removal of the lymph nodes, typically in the groin or armpit area. Lymphedema is a common complication of cancer and cancer treatment. Specifically, those who have had radiation and/or surgery of the lymph nodes in the neck, armpit, pelvis, or groin (usually as a cancer treatment) are at risk for developing lymphedema. Secondary lymphedema may occur immediately following surgery or up to 30 years later. In the United States, most secondary lymphedemas are the result of breast cancer therapy.

Patients at risk for developing lymphedema should be identified early, monitored, and educated regarding means for avoiding the occurrence of lymphedema. Ideally, patients who are at risk for developing lymphedema, especially those who have undergone lymph node removal and/or radiation, would obtain a consult by a certified lymphedema therapist. This early consultation would provide an opportunity for much needed education in the area of lymphedema management and prevention as well as address any post-operative problems that may exist such as scar tightness and decreased strength and range of motion of the affected extremity. As part of this specialized

physical therapy, patients are instructed in ways to avoid developing lymphedema, how to recognize the signs, and how to obtain the most effective treatment if lymphedema does occur. Lymphedema is most successfully managed via Complete Decongestive Therapy (*CDT*). *CDT* consists of skin care, manual lymphatic drainage (*MLD*), bandaging/compression garments, and specifically designed exercise programs.

There is no cure for lymphedema; however, it can be successfully treated with skilled therapy and patient compliance. Even more importantly, the onset of lymphedema may very well be prevented by following some simple guidelines such as avoiding temperature extremes (particularly heat), avoiding infections, and avoiding any blunt trauma to the affected body part. If you are at risk for lymphedema, do not ignore any signs of lymphedema. Physical Therapy for Women offers lymphedema treatment via Complete Decongestive Therapy by a certified lymphedema therapist. *If you have questions about lymphedema or the services we offer at Physical Therapy for Women, please feel free to call us.*