

Precautionary Measures for Lymphedema

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General Precautions for Lymphedema

Observe the general precautions at all times for prevention and while treating lymphedema. Consult with your physician if you see any increase of the swelling in the arm, leg, chest, abdomen or genitalia.

In lymphedema remember that the few remaining lymphatic vessels are very fragile and will not tolerate any heavy massage pressure, e.g., deep tissue massage, Neuromuscular Therapy (NMT), Rolfing, Hellerwork, etc. (Eliska O., Eliskova M., 1994, 1995).

Be aware that in primary lymphedema other limbs may also be at risk and observe the same precautions for them.

Avoid the four "I's:"

1. Injury
2. Infection
3. Increased temperature
4. Increased pressure

Injury and Infection

- Do not let skin remain wet or damp. Dry the limb thoroughly, especially between the toes. Use lotion after bathing.
- Pay very close attention to hygiene of skin and nails in order to avoid infections. Use fragrance-free, low pH, hypoallergenic lotion. Treat any infection actively. Clean even small wounds very thoroughly. Cover the wound with antibacterial ointment and a bandage. Change the bandage if dirty or dry.
- Prevention of infection: teeth and gums, skin, bladder, vagina, etc.
- Avoid invasive care of the affected arm: shots, vaccination, drawing of blood, needles of any kind, lymphography, fluid extraction, acupuncture, etc.
- Avoid any deep tissue massage or manipulation on the affected limb; it may destroy the few functioning lymphatic vessels left (Eliska O., Eliskova M., 1994, 1995).
- Cut nails straight and slightly smooth on the corner. Do not tear the cuticle of the nail (use cuticle cream). Have manicures and pedicures.
- Prevent getting scratches from cats, dog or other animals.
- Use long mitts when cooking or handling hot dishes.
- Use an electric shaver for shaving. Avoid blades.
- Use leather gloves and sunscreen while gardening.
- Use gloves when applying or working with harsh chemicals.
- Use thimble while sewing.
- Be careful when handling a cigarette or cutting object with the affected side.
- Use insect repellent to prevent insect bites.
- Do not wear slippers or open shoes such as sandals. See a podiatrist.
- Prevent irritation. For example, pay attention to what deodorant you use - does it cause a rash?

Increased Temperature

- Avoid saunas, hot baths, hot tubs, hot showers, UV, etc. Use beach umbrellas.
- Avoid sunburn: long exposure to the sun from outdoor activities or sunbathing.
- Avoid long car or bus trips during hot weather.
- Avoid burns from working with fire or cooking.
- If you are burned lightly, use ice and cover right away, disinfect and don't let the blister break.

Increased Pressure

- Avoid doing vigorous exercises with the affected limb, strenuous tasks, excessive lifting, etc.
- Do not wear tight clothes (including sleeves), "over the shoulder" bags, brassiere straps, belts, jewelry (rings, bracelets, elastic band, etc.) or heavy breast prostheses.
- Hold the limb in different positions. Especially do not always leave it hanging. Lift the limb and do periodically short duration exercises; whenever you have a limb immobilized for a long period of time elevate it if possible.
- Do not sleep on an affected arm. The arm should be slightly elevated.
- Plane flights require additional external compression to avoid increased swelling. The cabin pressure and/or the lack of oxygen delivered to the bloodstream may aggravate the lymphedema considerably (Casley-Smith, 1996).
- Do not have your blood pressure taken on the affected arm.

Skin Care

The skin is the body's first line of defense. It protects the body from trauma and infection and aids in temperature regulation. Therefore it is essential to keep the skin healthy. Individuals who have had any impairment of the lymphatic system

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Skin Care - continued

are especially at risk for developing an infection. A small cut or abrasion can allow bacteria to enter the skin, and the stagnant lymphatic fluid is a perfect environment in which bacteria can grow.

Before the treatment can be started the limb has to be clean, free of fungus or any infections.

Teach your patients simple measures that will promote healthy skin. Treat any skin and nail condition. You may need to work with a dermatologist or podiatrist.

Ask the client to check the condition of the skin every day (this is best done before bathing), particularly in the skin folds and areas with reduced sensation.

Look for signs of infection, cuts, skin breaks, insect bits, etc.

Check fingernails carefully for cracked cuticles, hangnails, etc.

Don't tear the cuticle of the nail, use cuticle cream. Cut nails straight and slightly rounded on the corners. Use a hair dryer to dry between folds of skin. Have manicures and pedicures.

- Keep skin well-lubricated with skin emollients (low Ph and lanolin based). Make sure to use a lotion that will not harm the elastic fibers of the bandages. Use it once or twice daily. Don't use soap that may leave a residue on the skin.
- Treat fungal infections as soon as possible.
- Take care of other infections and treat them as soon as possible.

Daily Skin Care

- Inspect the skin daily for any cracks, cuts, insect bites, or dry areas with reduced sensation or where there are skin folds.
- Clean skin daily with perfume-free soap, that does not leave a residue, such as Neutrogena, Dove, Basis, Tone.
- Dry skin completely, especially the area between the toes.
- Keep skin supple. Use once or twice a day a low-pH lanolin-based lotion such as Eucerin or Aquafor, to keep the skin moist and pliable.
- Check fingernails and toenails for any signs of infections, cracks, fungus, hangnails. Do not tear cuticles, use a cuticle cream. Use an emery board for your nails.

Foot and Lower Extremity Care

The feet of lymphedema patients, especially if they are associated pathologies (diabetes, venous insufficiency, etc.) need to be taken care of, perhaps with the help of a podiatrist, dermatologist or an orthopedist.

In addition to the podedema (edema of the foot), any fungus of the inter-digital spaces (intertrigo), nail fungus (onychomycosis), nail infections (paronychia) and ingrown nails (onychocryptosis) must be conscientiously treated.

The fit of shoes, orthotics, or heel lifts should be carefully considered in order to prevent foot instability, pronation, calcaneal eversion, lack of dorsiflexion, hammer toes, calluses, etc. Shoes need to be comfortable.

The practitioner may recommend regular exercises for the feet and legs.

Ulcers are very rare in lymphedema. They may be seen in elephantiasis, infection or some injury, but they generally indicate the presence of a different but perhaps associated pathology such as venous, arterial or diabetic condition. They need to be treated with extreme care.

Helpful Hints

- To care for corns and calluses, do not use over-the-counter medications such as Dr. Scholl's corn pads, as they contain acid. After the bath or shower, when skin is softened, buff the skin to remove the dead skin and soften calluses. Corns may develop between the fourth and fifth toes as the foot swells. Fungus can also develop, leading to infections. Changing to larger or wider shoes may prevent the development of corns. Use lamb's wool between the toes to reduce friction.
- Prevent fungus growth, which can lead to infection. Some patients periodically soak their feet in a mixture of one part vinegar and three parts water for fungus prevention or treatment.
- Some patients recommend the following for local or general fungal infection: the oral administration of one tablespoon of raw, unpasteurized vinegar with one tablespoon of honey in a cup of water. One glass a day in an empty stomach, in the morning, for 4-6 weeks, may further help more difficult cases.
- Dry your feet very well after bathing, especially between the toes. You can use a hair dryer. Do not use alcohol on your feet. There are many foot creams available on the market. Use an anti-fungal powder in your shoes, such as Zeasorb.
- When you trim your toenails, round the edges to prevent ingrown toenails. Boil clippers for one minute and let cool for one hour before using.
- If you are unable to cut your toenails, see a podiatrist regularly.

Please consult your health care provider for your unique situation.