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Lymphedema Prevention

If I experience swelling of my arm after surgery, how would I know whether or not this is indeed lymphedema?

We can never be certain without more clinical information, since there are a variety of reasons that swelling of a single arm or leg might occur after surgery. In the setting of cancer surgeries, we become concerned that the swelling might be lymphedema, since the cancer surgery is a known provoking cause. In such circumstances, it is very important to seek the input of a health care professional. Physical examination and, possibly, additional tests will help to determine the cause. It is very likely, but not certain, that the swelling will prove to be lymphedema.

If I suspect that I might have lymphedema, is it time-critical that I take action?

It is important to act promptly. There is medical evidence to suggest that the duration of lymphedema will determine its severity and its responsiveness to treatment. At the earliest sign of a potential problem, a health care professional should be consulted to initiate whichever tests and treatments may be indicated.

When do you recommend that I see a lymphedema therapist?

In order to be proactive and to reduce the risk of developing lymphedema, it is perfectly acceptable to see a physical therapist for 1-3 sessions to learn self-care techniques.

Should I allow blood-drawing from my affected arm?

There are life-compromising and life-saving situations where intravenous or surgical interventions on the limb-at-risk are unavoidable. Since there is a definable degree of risk associated with intravenous punctures, the correct answer would be, never allow this in a situation where it is avoidable; on the other hand, if the health care team has a valid, unavoidable need to use the arm for your health, do not hesitate to give your consent.

What about vaccinations? Acupuncture? Tattoos?

These should also be avoided in the limb at risk.

What about taking blood pressure in the arm?

We prefer that this be avoided, particularly in circumstances, like intra-operatively, where the blood pressure is measured repetitively.

What if both arms are at risk?

The cautious approach would be to take all blood pressure readings in the legs. One can also draw blood from the foot, although the procedure is more time-consuming and laborious. Here, again, in urgent or life-saving circumstances, it is certainly acceptable to use the arm(s)-at-risk.

Should I wear protective gloves for work in the house and garden?

This is always a good idea where reasonable and feasible. Kitchen gloves, oven mitts, and garden gloves are indispensable to lymphedema prevention.

Do I need to worry about sunburn?

Absolutely. Sun block should always be applied, at least to the limb at risk. Sunburn can definitely trigger lymphedema.

If I get a cut, a scratch or an insect bite on my arm, should I panic?

Definitely not. There is a very, very low likelihood of any of these events leading to lymphedema development. For breaks in the skin, it is, nevertheless, important to cleanse well and apply a local over-the-counter disinfectant. If there is any sign of swelling (even modest) or any visible red streaks or other signs of active infection, consultation with an MD should occur immediately.

What about hot tubs and saunas?

Hot tubs and saunas pose no problem, provided that the temperature remains below 105° F.

What about sports massage?

Shiatsu and deep acupressure massage should be avoided.

How important is weight control for lymphedema?

Weight control is very important. Excess is a readily identified risk factor for the development of lymphedema among high-risk patients. Preventing weight gain and obesity will help to limit the risk of lymphedema.

Does exercise help?

Exercise is definitely beneficial.

What about weight-lifting?

Even weight lifting above the shoulder level is conceivable, in principle, provided that you wear a preventive Class I garment during the exercise. You should also work up gradually to the desired work threshold.

Is smoking a risk factor for lymphedema?

No, it's just bad for you in general.

Should I be measuring my arm regularly at home?

No, there is no added benefit over simply taking care of the arm and avoiding risky situations when feasible.

Should I get a compression sleeve even if I don't have lymphedema?

There is no 'hard' evidence to support the efficacy, but this is a reasonable choice to consider for airline travel, high altitudes, and strenuous physical exertion of the arm.