

## **Lymphedema and Exercise Considerations**

**By Mark Love**

Breast cancer will strike an estimated 215,000 women in the year 2004, resulting in more than 40,000 deaths. Of those who survive breast cancer, as many as 25% will suffer from some degree of lymphedema, or accumulation of lymph fluid, in the soft tissues of the arm. This can affect quality of life significantly.

### **What is Lymphedema?**

Lymphedema occurs when the lymphatic system is obstructed, which causes an accumulation of fluid. The resulting swelling can cause discomfort, pain, and disrupt nerve function in the affected area. In the case of breast cancer survivors, the removal of lymph nodes can lead to lymphedema in the arm(s). Radiation and chemotherapy treatments can add to the risk.

### **Risk Factors and Symptoms**

Several other risk factors can cause lymphedema, or exacerbate this condition. Heavy smoking, obesity, diabetes, other circulatory problems, and previous surgeries in the affected area can cause increased swelling. Furthermore, lymphedema may begin immediately after surgery, or make take some time to develop. There are a number of potential triggers for lymphedema:

- Traumas to the muscles or skin of the arm that can lead to infection. These include scratches, bug bites, sunburn, kitchen burns, garden cuts, plant rashes (poison ivy or oak), skin cracking from chronic dryness, and skin tears from nervous picking habits.
- Gaining a lot of weight after breast cancer treatment. Like being overweight to start with, gaining weight increases your risk for arm swelling.
- Heat. Because it widens blood vessels, heat allows more fluid to get into an area at risk for swelling. Very hot weather and sitting in hot tubs can bring on lymphedema.
- Blood clots. Occasionally, a blood clot in the axillary (underarm) vein will back up fluid in the arm.
- Long plane flights. Although it's rare for a long flight to bring on lymphedema for the first time, it may worsen an existing case of lymphedema because of the changes in air pressure.
- Extensive breast cancer in the lymph nodes. This uncommon cause of lymphedema can occur if the cancer blocks the free flow of lymph fluid trying to drain through the nodes.

## **Treatment Options**

The most important aspect of lymphedema treatment is prevention. In particular, skin care is paramount. Burns, cuts, splinters, hangnails, insect bites, and similar skin trauma can lead to infection, which can bring about and/or intensify lymphedema. Redness and/or swelling/tenderness in the affected arms are definite causes for concern, as is fever. At first notice of any of these symptoms, and especially if the individual is already diabetic, a physician's care is vital. Antibiotics are often prescribed immediately to bring the infection under control.

Additionally, the following skin care guidelines can help: wash and moisturize the affected arm frequently; use more natural soaps, such as Dove, to avoid drying out the skin; wear protective gloves during tasks such as dishwashing and gardening; take frequent breaks during vigorous activity that involves the affected arm; rest the arm in an elevated position. Furthermore, avoid unusually hot showers, baths, or hot tubs (you may want to avoid the latter entirely); avoid handling heavy objects with the affected arm; drink alcohol sparingly; and don't have blood pressure measured on the affected arm. (For a more complete list of protective measures, please see the references section at the end of this article).

Massage and/or compression sleeves or bandages may help, as well. Several types of bandages and sleeves are available, each with their own strengths and limitations. Furthermore, there are advantages and disadvantages with regard to the use of either bandages or sleeves. Your physician can help you make the best choice for your particular situation.

## **Exercise and Lymphedema**

Exercise can be both good and bad for the individual with lymphedema. On one hand, exercise can help to move lymphatic fluid, and thus reduce swelling. On the other hand, exercise increases blood flow to the affected area, which can make the problem worse. Moderation in frequency, intensity and resistance is important. Flexibility work is important, as it helps the body clear fluids, and gradual strength work (starting with very little resistance) can help the arm handle somewhat heavier workloads. Swimming is often ideal, since it provides some resistance for the arm to work against, while at the same time providing external pressure (in the form of water) which helps deter swelling.

No matter what the severity of lymphedema for a particular individual, communication with a qualified physician is vital. It is all too easy to increase the severity of lymphedema. A sound nutrition plan is also important. Often, cancer treatment promotes weight gain, which can exacerbate lymphedema. Proper eating habits, both in terms of calorie and nutrient intake, can help promote healing and weight loss.

## Resources

There are a number of resources available to help breast cancer survivors and cancer survivors in general. The following is a very small sample, focused on lymphedema in particular. Please see your physician for more guidance.

*The National Lymphedema Network (NLN) is an internationally recognized non-profit organization founded in 1988 by Saskia R.J. Thiadens, R.N. to provide education and guidance to lymphedema patients, health care professionals and the general public by disseminating information on the prevention and management of primary and secondary lymphedema. The NLN is supported by tax-deductible donations and is a driving force behind the movement in the U.S. to standardize quality treatment for lymphedema patients nationwide. In addition, the NLN supports research into the causes and possible alternative treatments for this often incapacitating, long-neglected condition.*

[www.lymphnet.org](http://www.lymphnet.org)

*Breastcancer.org is a non-profit organization for breast cancer education.*

[www.breastcancer.org/lymphedema](http://www.breastcancer.org/lymphedema)