

# Precautions for Patients with Lower Extremity Lymphedema

Anyone who has undergone lymph node removal and/or radiation therapy is at risk of developing lymphedema. The capacity of the lymphatic system to remove fluid and other substances (lymphatic loads) from the tissues has been reduced by these procedures to a certain degree. Lymphedema may occur directly after the surgery/radiation, may develop months or even years following the procedure, or it may never evolve.

Certain activities and situations may trigger the onset of lymphedema, or may exacerbate the symptoms of existing lymphedema, by either further reducing the transport capacity of the lymphatic system, or by increasing the amount of lymphatic loads. Individuals who are aware of these risk factors know what can be done to avoid the onset of swelling and infections, which are common in patients suffering from lymphedema (and those at risk). Knowing the necessary precautions also helps to prevent aggravation of the symptoms in existing lymphedema.

The following Do's and Don'ts may have a cumulative effect. Whether one or more of these events or situations will be a triggering element, also depends on other factors, such as overall health (other conditions) and fitness, the extent of the initial procedure (scarring, number of lymph nodes removed), obesity and others.

Patients with Lymphedema, and those at risk of developing it, should observe the following precautionary measures. In many cases modifications to the life style are necessary, but a normal activity level should be maintained. In other words, individuals should not go to the extreme and refrain from using the extremity in fear of developing lymphedema.

## Do's and Don'ts for Lower Extremity Lymphedema

### Injuries

### Temperature

### Clothing, Compression Stocking, Jewelry

### Exercises

### Skin Care

### Nutrition

### Travel

## Avoid any injuries to the skin

1. Do not walk barefoot
2. Pets: be careful playing with your pets (scratches)
3. Mosquito bites: wear insect repellants, avoid mosquito infested areas
4. Nail care: you should keep your toenails short but be careful cutting your toenails, do not cut the cuticles
5. Shaving: use an electric razor to remove hair from the leg or lower body quadrant, do not use razor blades
6. Injections: do not allow injections in the swollen (or at risk) leg, in the buttocks on the affected side, or the abdominal area
7. Venapunctures: do not allow blood to be drawn from the affected (or at risk) leg
8. To take care of minor injuries, always carry an alcohol swab, local antibiotic and a bandaid with you
9. Wear solid shoes to avoid ankle injuries
10. No piercing or tattoos on the leg or the lower body quadrants

## Avoid heat

1. Avoid hot showers. Dry thoroughly but avoid scrubbing or rubbing the skin with the towel
2. Avoid hot packs and/or ice packs on your leg
3. Avoid saunas or hot tubs and whirlpools. Do not sit too close to a fire place
4. Avoid massage (kneading, stroking, etc.) on the leg and the lumbar area. Note: Manual lymph drainage is not considered to be a form of massage
5. Avoid cosmetics that irritate the skin
6. Avoid sunburn. While in the sun, use sunscreen, cover the leg with appropriate clothing or a dry towel

### **Clothing/Compression Stocking/Jewelry**

1. Avoid clothing that is too tight (underwear, pants, socks or stockings that restrict)
2. Do not wear tight jewelry (toe rings) avoid elastic bands around your ankle
3. Wear your compression stocking/panty hose all day. Use rubber gloves when applying your compression garment. See your therapist at least every six months (or sooner) to check the condition of the garment. If necessary, apply your bandages at night

### **Exercises**

1. Always discuss proper exercises and activities with your therapist
2. Avoid movements that overstrain. Should you experience discomfort in your leg, reduce the exercise activity and elevate your leg
3. Elevate your leg as often as possible
  - *Beneficial Activities:*  
Swimming, lymphedema exercise program, self-MLD, Yoga, water aerobics, walking, Norditrac/treadmill (10-15 minutes, slow walking speed), easy biking (15-20 minutes, use a wide and comfortable saddle), calf pumps, deep breathing exercises
  - *Medium Risk Activities:*  
Light jogging/running, biking (longer than 30 minutes), stair master (longer than 5 minutes), Norditrac/treadmill (longer than 15 minutes), light horse riding, golfing
  - *High Risk Activities:*  
Running, tennis/racquet sports, hockey, soccer, wrestling, kickboxing, step-aerobics, weight lifting with the leg, intense horse riding, sitting or standing over long periods

### **Note:**

**If you wish to engage in either medium or high-risk activities, you should discuss additional precautionary measures (extra compression during the activity) with your therapist or doctor.**

### **Skin Care**

1. Keep your skin meticulously clean (use clean undergarments and socks at all times)
2. Inspect your skin for any cracks, fungal infections or rashes
3. Moisturize your skin daily, especially after taking a shower or bath. Use appropriate ointments or lotions (preferably free of alcohol and fragrance)
4. Dry your skin thoroughly after taking a shower or bath (especially in skin creases and web spaces). Use a soft towel and do not scrub
5. If you undergo radiation therapy apply the ointments recommended by your physician to any radiation redness on your skin. Avoid chlorinated pools and direct exposure to sunlight

### **Nutrition**

1. Obesity may have a negative effect on your swelling; maintain your ideal body weight
2. There is no special diet for lymphedema. Keep your diet well balanced. Today most nutritionists recommend a low-salt and low-fat diet, high in fiber
3. Eating too little protein in the hope to have a positive effect on lymphedema (high-protein edema) is not recommended and may cause serious health problems. Reducing the protein intake will not reduce the protein component in lymphedema

### **See your Doctor if you:**

1. Have any signs of an infection (fever, chills, red and hot skin)
2. Notice any itching, rash, fungal infections, or any other unusual changes on the skin
3. Experience an increase in swelling in your fingers, hand, arm or chest
4. Experience pain

### **Travel**

1. Avoid mosquito-infested regions
2. Wear an additional bandage or stocking on top of your compression garment when traveling by car, train or air (see also Lymphedema and Air Travel below). Incorporate frequent stops, or get up from your seat frequently, elevate your leg(s) as often as possible