

## Lymphedema

Removal of the lymph nodes under your surgical arm or radiation therapy to the underarm area may cause **lymphedema**. (**Lymph**, from lymphatic fluid, and **edema**, swelling from fluid accumulation.) This condition, which results in swelling, occurs when there is a decreased flow and removal of lymphatic fluid from your arm. Lymphedema may happen shortly after surgery or years later. This condition may produce pain, restricted movement of the shoulder and arm and increased susceptibility to infection. Medications and treatments are limited in their effectiveness; therefore, the best strategy is to prevent the problem from occurring. Fortunately, only a small percentage of patients experience chronic problems with lymphedema.

The first line of defense is to regain your arm's full range of motion by using the exercises suggested by your healthcare provider. While these exercises may seem dull and unnecessary, they facilitate the flow of the lymphatic fluid from the arm area. **Do not begin an exercise program until your physician gives you permission.**

### Suggestions to Help Prevent Arm Lymphedema:

- For several weeks following surgery, you will need to lie down for several hours a day to aid the recovery process. When lying down, prop your arm on a pillow above the level of your heart to facilitate drainage of fluid. Elevation of the arm reduces any additional blockage of fluid.

- Throughout the day, keep your arm slightly out from your body so as not to compress the underarm area. When sitting, place a small pillow or a small stuffed animal under the arm to keep the arm away from the body and keep swelling at a minimum. Some swelling under the arm is due to surgery and will improve with time.
- Avoid using your arm and hand in a dependent position (below the level of the heart) for a long period of time. If you need to perform a task of this sort, periodically hold your arms above your head to promote drainage.
- Make a fist or squeeze a small rubber ball repeatedly several times a day to assist in removal of accumulated fluid.

### Avoid Injury and Infection:

- Do not allow the surgical arm to be used for blood pressure checks, blood samples or injections.
- Do not wear anything that is tight on the arm or hand (rings, watches, bracelets or tight elastic in sleeves).
- Do not cut your cuticles; keep hands soft by using hand lotion.
- Do not carry heavy packages, purses or suitcases on the side of your surgery.
- Wear protective gloves when working in the garden, washing dishes or using any irritating chemicals such as hair dye.

- Close a back fastening bra?
- Zip up a dress completely that has a long back zipper?
- Wash the upper part of your back on the shoulder blade area on the opposite side from surgery?
- Reach over your head into a cabinet to remove an object?
- Make a double bed?

If your range of motion needs improvement, talk with your healthcare provider about a referral to a physical therapist or to an exercise program designed to increase your arm capacity.