

## **What is Lymphedema?**

Lymphedema is a condition in which the lymphatic system of the body is unable to properly transport lymph fluid from the tissue spaces back to the blood stream. This compromised transport leads to swelling, and can present itself in the extremities, trunk, genitalia, head or neck. Lymphedema is unlike normal edema or swelling, in that it is made up of protein rich fluid (lymph) that can only be drained by the lymphatic vessels. If the lymph system is not functioning properly, then the fluid and proteins will remain in the tissue spaces despite elevation, and may turn into a chronic condition. Finding and addressing lymphedema early helps ensure faster, more successful outcomes, however, those with lymphedema can also benefit significantly from intervention in later, more chronic stages of the disease. Because lymphedema is often mechanical in nature (meaning that the structure of the lymphatic system is compromised), lymphedema is a life-long condition. There is no cure, but the condition can be successfully managed

## **What causes lymphedema?**

Lymphedema has a variety of causes including, but not limited to: congenital anomaly, trauma, surgical intervention (most well known is lymph node resection during surgery for breast or other cancers), infection, or radiation treatment. The most common cause of lymphedema in this country is surgical removal of lymph nodes in the axillary (armpit) region due to breast cancer. Having radiation after such a surgery increases risk.

## **What are the symptoms of lymphedema?**

Swelling is the main symptom of lymphedema, and often this swelling is localized to one body region or limb. One has increased risk for lymphedema if she has a history of one or more of the above known causes. To determine whether swelling is truly lymphedema requires a discussion with one's health care provider. It is important to rule out swelling that may be caused by other organ systems (especially the heart and kidneys) prior to onset of lymphedema treatment.

## **How can physical therapy help?**

It is the job of physical therapists to help people regain function and movement due to effects of various conditions, and lymphedema is no exception. Physical therapists with special training can help control and manage lymphedema through complete decongestive therapy. Initial management of lymphedema is often quite intense, and patients work closely with their therapists in developing a treatment plan that will best address the swelling and fit the patients' needs. This initial phase of treatment is often comprised of manual lymphatic drainage (which feels like a light form of massage) followed by compression bandaging. The size of the limb is closely monitored, and once the limb has decreased to the desired size, the patient enters the maintenance phase of treatment. It is at this point in treatment that the patient takes over her care. As

previously mentioned, lymphedema is a life-long condition, and commitment to maintaining the decreased limb size is essential to success. Maintenance is most often achieved by wearing compression garments. There are many styles and options to choose from, and the patient and her therapist work together to find the garment that best meets the needs of each patient. At this point in treatment, the patient is often well educated in lymphedema, and is knowledgeable in behavioral changes and exercises that will promote successful ongoing management of her condition independently.

### **Who Should be Referred to a Women's Health Physical Therapist?**

#### Those with:

Swelling anywhere in the arm, wrist, hand or fingers after treatment for breast cancer

Trouble getting jewelry on (rings, watches, bracelets) or having sleeves fit correctly

Lack of knowledge about the condition and prevention of Lymphedema

“Pitting” in the tissues of the arm (where an indentation is made by a finger or by leaning against an object and then takes time to ‘fill in’ after the pressure is removed)