

Lymphedema Resource

Winning the Breast Cancer Battle: Empowering Warriors and Guiding Loved Ones

By Karen Iverson

Lymphedema is swelling in the body that can occur on the side where axillary surgery occurs and lymph nodes are removed. The swelling is due to the lymph system not being able to move fluids upward and out of the arm. Having a greater number of lymph nodes removed elevates the likelihood of lymphedema occurring, but it can occur even if only one lymph node has been removed. My surgeon removed a total of twenty-six lymph nodes. She explained to me lymph nodes are gathered in clumps and my sentinel lymph node was positive for cancer so additional nodes had to be removed. Lymphedema can also occur at any time, even many years later. For me, lymphedema occurred as swelling in my arm and hand after I had been pulling myself up to a high shelf multiple times in preparation for a yard sale. At first, I thought maybe I had eaten too much salt. As it developed pain began radiating through my arm and I sought out a lymphedema specialist who taught me to wrap my arm. Over time, the severity of my lymphedema has lessened to the point where it is not noticeable or a major concern. I do still take preventative measures though, including wearing a sleeve and glove on airplanes and when lifting heavy objects or working out.

I had a bad experience buying a glove. My lymphedema therapist instructed me to buy a glove and sleeve since my lymphedema is in my arm and my hand. She informed me I should always wear my sleeve with my glove to prevent further swelling in my hand as the glove pushes fluid out of the hand and into the arm and then the sleeve pushes it out of the arm. My representative at the medical supply store ordered a gauntlet for me, not a glove. Unfortunately, when I wore it, I started having greater swelling in my fingers, and I developed an infection between my fingers because the gauntlet pushed my fingers together and they became sweaty. The remedy was the glove as was initially requested.

My therapist informed me of several additional things. First, as mentioned before, I should wear my sleeve and glove whenever I am lifting heavy objects or traveling on airplanes. Second, they should be washed with a mild detergent that does not contain fabric softener, and is not Woolite, and they should be replaced every six months. Third, it's important to avoid infection and trauma to the affected arm and hand; I shouldn't have blood drawn, get injections or an IV, or have my blood pressure taken on that arm. Fourth, I shouldn't get a massage to the affected area and surrounding back unless performed by a therapist who is specially trained in lymphatic massage. And, lastly, gaining weight can make lymphedema worse.

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The Mayo Clinic and MD Anderson list precautions you can take to help prevent lymphedema which include, but are not limited to:

- Not lifting more than 5 lbs. with the affected arm
- Avoiding trauma and injury to the affected area, including getting new tattoos
- Not having blood drawn from that arm or blood pressure taken
- Avoiding the sun and protecting from sunburn by using SPF 30 or higher sunscreen
- Keeping the skin dry and moisturized with hypoallergenic, alcohol-free lotions and deodorants
- Using insect repellent to avoid insect bites
- Using an electric razor or cream hair-remover to avoid nicks and cuts while removing hair
- Refusing to cut cuticles and avoid the hand or arm massage during manicures (massage should only be performed by those trained in lymphatic massage)
- Refraining from anything tight on that arm or hand including clothing, such as bras, camisoles, and tops, and jewelry except for wearing a compression sleeve on airplanes and when lifting anything over 5 lbs.
- Using the lightest bra prosthesis possible if you need one
- Avoiding extreme heat or cold to the limb (if you opt to go in a hot tub, keep the limb out of the water and limit exposure to fifteen minutes or less)
- Wearing gloves while doing housework, caring for animals, and gardening and using a thimble for sewing
- Avoiding repetitive motion of the limb and frequently elevating it above the heart
- Getting exercise and keeping body weight down

Overall, consult your physician regarding this and how other health conditions could affect lymphedema.