Can Lymphedema Be Prevented?

While there is currently no cure for lymphedema, there are things you can do to reduce your risk of developing lymphedema. The risk of lymphedema is life-long. Following these preventative steps will greatly reduce the possibility that you will develop lymphedema:

**DO**

- rest your arm or leg while recovering from surgery or radiation treatment
- exercise and stretch, but avoid strenuous activities, such as those that make you sweat, until after you’ve completely recovered from surgery or radiation
- when traveling by air, wear a professionally fitted compression garment, which is a long sleeve or stocking made to compress the arm or leg to encourage the flow of lymph fluid out of the affected arm or leg
- protect your arms and legs from sunburns or other burns

**DON’T**

- don’t wear clothing or jewelry that feels tight or uncomfortable
- don’t carry purses, briefcases, or heavy packages with your affected arm
- don’t apply heat, such as with a heating pad, to your affected limb
- don’t do repetitive activities, heavy lifting, or pulling
- don’t use hot tubs or saunas

For Further Information on Lymphedema

The National Lymphedema Network
1-800-541-3259
www.lymphnet.org

The American Cancer Society
1-800-ACS-2345
http://www.cancer.org

National Cancer Institute
1-800-4-CANCER
http://cancer.gov

The Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation
1-800-I’M AWARE (1-800-462-9273)
www.komen.org

Y-ME National Breast Cancer Organization
1-800-221-2141 (English)
1-800-986-9505 (Spanish)
www.y-me.org

To Find a Certified Lymphedema Therapist

Lymphology Association of North America (LANA)
1-773-756-8971
http://www.clt-lana.org

National Lymphedema Network
1-800-541-3259
www.lymphnet.org

If you have ever had radiation or surgery for cancer, **lymphedema** is something that you need to know about.
What Is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema (LIMF-eh-DEE-ma) is the unhealthy buildup of lymph fluid in your body. Lymph fluid helps fight infection and disease by collecting and moving bacteria, viruses, and waste through your lymphatic system, flushing it from your body. When extra fluid builds up in the body, it causes swelling, usually in an arm or leg. Lymphedema results from common cancer treatments such as surgery and radiation. It can develop soon after treatment, or may show up many months, years, or even decades later.

Lymphedema can:
- lead to infections
- cause pain and discomfort
- be a long-term condition
- be controlled through awareness and treatment

Once you develop lymphedema, it can be managed, but it cannot be cured. It is important that you do everything you can to help prevent it from developing.

What Are the Symptoms of Lymphedema?

The symptoms of lymphedema often appear slowly over a period of years. Even if you don’t develop symptoms in the year following cancer treatment, you may still be at risk. If you have had surgery or radiation treatment for cancer and begin to notice any of the following symptoms, you may have lymphedema, and should call a doctor:

- pain, aching, or redness in an arm or leg, including fingers or toes
- swelling (with or without pain) anywhere in your body that lasts for 1 to 2 weeks
- jewelry or clothing feels tight but there is no weight gain
- a feeling of weakness, heaviness, or tightness in the arm or leg
- repeated infections in the arm or leg
- hardening and thickening of the skin on the arm or leg
- a temperature of 100.5 degrees Fahrenheit or higher that isn’t related to a cold or flu

What Is The Treatment for Lymphedema?

If you have lymphedema, there is effective treatment to reduce the swelling, prevent the condition from getting worse, and limit the risk of infection. Experts generally recommend Complete Decongestive Therapy (CDT) for people with lymphedema. CDT is a combination of treatments that include special massage for lymph drainage, exercises, compression, and skin care. These treatments should be given by a certified lymphedema therapist or someone who has received special lymphedema therapy training. Early treatment focuses on reducing the swelling and controlling the pain, and can shorten the time that treatment is needed.

Where Can I Get Support for Lymphedema?

Attend lymphedema support group meetings in your community. These meetings are a good way to connect with people who understand what you’re going through. The National Lymphedema Network website or hotline can provide a list of support groups around the country.

Participate in online message boards and chat rooms. Make sure that the site you go to is recommended by a reputable source, such as The National Lymphedema Network. If you don’t have internet access, call any of the hotline numbers listed at the end of this pamphlet.