

Lymphedema Handout

Anatomy

The main circulatory system consists of the heart pumping blood through the arteries out to the tissues, and then returning the blood back to the heart through the veins. The lymphatic system is designed to capture excess fluid in tissues and return it back to the main circulation. As this fluid travels through the lymphatic system, it is filtered by lymph nodes.

What is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is swelling of a body part caused by a malfunction of the lymphatic system causing blockage of the flow of lymphatic fluid. This leads to an abnormal collection of fluid in that region.

Risk Factors for Lymphedema Include

- Surgical removal of lymph nodes
- Radiation therapy which can scar down lymph nodes and vessels
- Tumor compressing or obstructing lymph nodes or vessels
- Scar tissue from surgery

If your lymphatic system has been altered, you are always at risk for lymphedema to occur, even years later.

Symptoms of Lymphedema

- Swelling, pain and increased risk of infection.

Prevention of Lymphedema

- Avoid flying, infection, sunburn, overheating (for example, hot tub or sauna), and weight gain.
- For the arm or leg at risk, avoid overuse or blood pressure checks and also use early topical antibiotic ointment for insect or animal bites or scratches.

Treatment of Lymphedema involves Physical Therapy

- Patient Education
- Compression
- Manual Lymphatic Drainage
- Exercise as directed by the Physical Therapist

Finally, while you cannot cure lymphedema you can control it.