

Texas Breast Surgeons

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What You Need to Know About Lymphedema

The skin is the body's first line of defense. It protects the body from trauma and infection and aids in temperature regulation. Therefore, it is essential to keep the skin healthy. Patients that have an impairment of the lymphatic system, such as from axillary dissection, are especially at risk for developing infections. Any small cut or scrape can allow bacteria to enter the skin; stagnant lymphatic fluid is a perfect environment for bacteria to grow. I have put together a collection of helpful hints and advice on how to live better and manage lymphedema.

1. Inspect the skin daily for any cracks, cuts or dry areas. Check carefully areas with reduced sensation or where there are skin folds.
2. Clean skin daily – avoid soaps with large amounts of perfumes or dyes, these tend to dry your skin out and cause more breakdown.
3. Moisturize your skin routinely – the moister your skin is the less likely you will get cracks or openings related to dryness.
4. Check fingernails for any signs of infection, cracks or fungus. Be very careful cutting your fingernails. Use an Emory board when able. Try to avoid professional manicures; you will be at higher risk for infection.
5. Wear rubber gloves when washing dishes. Avoid rinsing in opposing water temperatures. Use like temperatures so you don't "shock" your hands. Wear oven mitts when handling hot dishes and foods, even a small burn can turn into a big problem.
6. Take more frequent rest breaks when scrubbing, mopping, cleaning or while doing other vigorous or repetitive activities, especially if your arm feels tired, heavy or achy. Try to rest your arm when able, even talking on the phone can make a shift in the lymphatic flow.
7. When you have your blood pressure checked or blood drawn, use the unaffected arm.
8. Shave with an electric razor instead of safety razor. This will minimize the potential for accidental injury or skin irritation.
9. Use insect repellent to try to avoid insect bites on the affected arm. If you notice an insect bite, sore or scratch, apply triple antibiotic ointment right away.
10. Avoid hot showers or baths – extreme hot or cold temperatures can cause a flare up. Especially avoid hot tubs, saunas, steam baths or cold pool water.
11. Try to avoid carrying your purse or bags on the affected arm.
12. Avoid tight fitting clothing, anything that is snug can stimulate flow but to the wrong areas.
13. Avoid wearing rings on the affected hand. If your lymphedema flares up, you could lose circulation in your fingers and have to get the rings cut off.
14. Don't smoke – smoking narrows the small blood vessels, lessening the blood flow in the arm. Don't drink alcohol – this causes the blood vessels to expand and leak extra fluid into the tissue.