



SELF CARE TIPS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF WOMEN FOLLOWING MASTECTOMY WITH AXILLARY LYMPH NODE DISSECTION

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ABSTRACT

An axillary lymph node dissection surgery routinely involves the removal of lymph nodes from the (axilla) armpit. These lymph nodes and associated lymph vessels play an important role in the body's immune system. Axillary lymph nodes help to drain the arm, upper back and chest on that side of the body. The lymph vessels pick up large proteins, toxin, wastes, bacteria, any cancer cells, and about 10-20% of the fluid that circulates throughout the body. Once this fluid enters the lymph vessel it is known as lymph fluid. The lymph vessels drain this lymph fluid into the axillary lymph nodes. The lymph nodes have macrophage cells that break up the proteins and waste. They also make lymphocytes, which helps to fight infection by destroying bacteria and toxins. The removal or impairment of these lymph nodes through surgery or radiation will be a risk for lymphedema. Education is focused on the prevention of anything that restricts lymph flow.

Keywords: Dissection, immune system, radiation, lymphedema

INTRODUCTION

Lymphedema is a chronic debilitating complication following mastectomy affecting the arm dysfunction and quality of life of breast cancer patients. It develops when the lymphatic flow is impaired and excess fluid and protein accumulates in the interstitial space. Affected women experiences pain, swelling, arm tightness, heaviness of the arm and recurrent skin infection. Self care management and maintenance of swelling reduction in minimizing lymphedema complications are essential factors in control. With proper education and care, lymphedema can be avoided or if it develops, it can be kept under control.

SELF CARE TIPS FOLLOWING MASTECTOMY WITH AXILLARY LYMPH NODE DISSECTION

Tips to reduce swelling after surgery or radiation:

Right after surgery, the incision in the breast and underarm area may swell. This swelling is usually short-term and slowly goes away over the next 6 to 12 weeks. Some women also have swelling in the

affected arm, which may go away on its own. But arm swelling after breast surgery can mean a higher risk of lymphedema later. Self care tips are

- Use the affected arm normally for combing the hair, bathing, dressing, and eating.
- Keep the affected arm above the level of heart 2 or 3 times a day and keep it there for 45 minutes. Lie down to do this, and fully support the arm. Place the arm up on pillows so that the hand is higher than the wrist and the elbow is little higher than the shoulder.
- Exercise the affected arm while it is supported above the level of your heart by opening and closing the hand 15 to 25 times. Repeat this 3 to 4 times a day. This helps to reduce swelling by pumping lymph fluid out of the arm through the undamaged lymph vessels.
- To get back the normal shoulder and arm movement, start exercising the affected arm about a week after surgery. For most people, full range of motion will regain within 4 to 6 weeks.

Tips to avoid infection: Body responds to infection by sending extra fluid and white blood cells to fight the infection. If lymph nodes and vessels are missing or damaged, it is harder for the body to move this extra fluid, which can trigger lymphedema. Good hygiene and careful skin care may reduce the risk of lymphedema by avoiding infections. Follow these tips to help you care for the hand and arm on the side of the body that had surgery:

- Have the blood drawn, IVs, and shots done in the unaffected arm. Also get vaccinations in the unaffected arm or somewhere else, like the hip.
- Keep the hands and cuticles soft and moist by regularly using moisturizing lotion or cream. Push the cuticles back with a cuticle stick rather than cutting them with scissors.
- Keep the arm clean. Clean and protect any skin breaks caused by cuts, scratches, insect bites, hangnails, or torn cuticles.
- Wear protective gloves when doing household chores that use chemical cleansers or steel wool, when gardening or doing yard work, and maybe when washing dishes.
- Wear a thimble when sewing to cut down on needle and pin pricks to the fingers.
- Use an electric shaver to remove underarm hair; it may be less likely to cut or irritate the skin than a blade razor or hair removal cream.
- Use an insect repellent to avoid bug bites when outdoors. If stung by a bee on the affected arm, clean and put ice on the area and raise the arm. Keep it clean, and consult the doctor if the sting shows any signs of infection.
- Avoid extreme cold. Warming can cause rebound swelling and chapping of the skin, which may lead to infection.

Tips to avoid burns and high heat: Like infections, burns can cause extra fluid to build up and cause swelling when lymph nodes have been removed or damaged. Tips to avoid burns include:

- Protect the chest, shoulder, and arm from sunburn. Use sunscreen labeled SPF 15 or higher, and try to stay out of the sun between the hours of 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., when the ultraviolet rays are strongest.
- Use oven mitts that cover the lower arms.
- Avoid oil splash burns from frying and steam burns from microwaved foods or boiling liquids.
- Avoid high heat, such as from hot tubs and saunas. Do not use a heating pad on the affected areas. Heat can increase fluid build-up.

Tips to avoid constriction: Constriction or squeezing of the arm may increase the pressure in nearby blood vessels. This may lead to increased fluid and swelling (much like water building up behind a dam). Some women have linked this with the start of lymphedema. Lymphedema has also been linked with air travel, possibly because of air pressure changes. Tips include:

- Wear loose jewellery, clothing, and gloves. Avoid anything that forms a snug band around the arm or wrist.
- Do not use shoulder straps when carrying briefcases and purses.
- Wear a loose-fitting bra with padded straps that do not dig into the shoulder.
- Have the blood pressure taken on the unaffected arm.
- On long or frequent airplane flights, wear a compression sleeve. A well-fitted compression sleeve may help prevent swelling. But careful fitting is required, since any garment that is too tight near the top can actually reduce the lymph flow. Safely raise the arm above the level of heart and exercise it during long flights.

Tips to avoid muscle strain: It's important to use the affected arm for normal, everyday activities to help to heal properly and regain normal strength. This includes doing things like brushing, combing hair and bathing. Using the muscles also helps to drain lymph fluid from the arms. If the patient had surgery or radiation treatment, ask the doctor or physiotherapist when to start exercise and what type of exercises to do. But keep in mind that overuse, which can result in injury, has been linked with the start of lymphedema in some women. It's a good idea to follow these tips:

Use the affected arm normally once fully healed about 4 to 6 weeks after surgery or radiation treatment. Begin to do the activities that had done before the surgery.

- Exercise regularly, but try not to over-tire the shoulder and arm.
- If the arm starts to ache, lie down and raise it above the level of the heart.
- Avoid vigorous, repeated activities; avoid heavy lifting or pulling.
- Use the unaffected arm or both arms as much as possible to carry heavy packages, groceries, handbags, or children.

Tips to avoid gaining weight: Extra fat requires more blood vessels. This means more fluid in the arms and chest, and places a greater burden on the lymph vessels that are left. Women who are more

overweight (obese) are more likely to have severe lymphedema. Imbalance of the body weight may cause muscle aches, pains and fatigue in the neck, shoulder and back muscles. Avoid oil and fat rich diets. Eat more servings of vegetables and fruits each day (about 2½ cups total) and stay at a healthy weight. Choose whole-grain foods instead of white flour and sugars.

Tips to care for cuts, scratches, or burns

- Wash the area with soap and water.
- Consult the doctor and apply ointment or antibiotic creams based on the prescription.
- Cover with a clean, dry gauze or bandage. Keep the area clean and covered until it heals. Change the dressing each day and if it gets wet.
- For burns, apply a cold pack or cold water for at least 15 minutes, then wash with soap and water and put on a clean, dry dressing.
- Check every day for early signs of infection: pus, rash, red blotches, swelling, increased heat, tenderness, chills, or fever.
- Consult the doctor right away if there is a sign of infection.

ACTIVITY GUIDELINES

Returning to the previous lifestyle and activities should be done in a gradual and safe manner. Activities can be grouped into categories based on time lapse since surgery and patient tolerance. General activity considerations are provided to retrain the involved arm and to gradually improve tolerance to activity. Some individuals may progress a little slower, while some may be able to return to activities more quickly. This may be due to the activity level before surgery, the extent of surgery or complications, tolerance to pain, and support help after surgery. Remember to monitor the arm's tolerance to activity and if an activity hurts, stop and consult the physician or therapist.

- Use other arm to assist if involved arm is weaker
- Use the arm normally to perform activities
- Monitor pain, muscle stiffness, and arm tolerance to activity

Lifting precautions – These activities need to be avoided or modified until arm tolerance improves:

- Lifting children
- Moving furniture
- Carrying luggage
- Vigorous vacuuming

When to consult the doctor

- If any part of the affected arm, chest, breast, or underarm area (axilla) feels hot, looks red, or swells suddenly. These could be a sign of infection or blood clot.
- If the temperature is 100.5°F or higher (taken by mouth) that is not related to a cold or flu
- If any new pain in the affected area with no known cause

CONCLUSION

Taking care of the whole body is important. A good diet and regular exercise help to stay at a healthy weight and helps to gain more energy. Try to reduce the stress in the life that helps to get enough sleep. Get support and strength from others. Support can come in many forms: family, friends, cancer support groups, places of worship or spiritual groups and try to improve the quality of life by having good self care activities, making healthy choices, and doing something which can make the body and mind to feel good as possible.

Acknowledgement :Nil

Conflict of Interest : No conflict of interest

Source of support : No sources of support

Ethical clearance : Necessary ethical clearance obtained from International Cancer Centre of C.S.I Kanyakumari Medical Mission Hospital, Neyyoor, Kanyakumari district, Tamilnadu.

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