



PERRY MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

Medical Rehabilitation

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LYMPHEDEMA AND YOU

The Facts

What is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is the abnormal build-up of fluids and cell wastes in the tissues. It occurs when the lymph system is unable to work properly. This can happen without any reason or when there has been damage to the lymph system (i.e. surgery, radiation to treat cancer, car accident, infection).

What Are Lymph Nodes and Where Are They?

There are many lymph nodes throughout the body. While they are sometimes referred to as glands, this is incorrect. Lymph nodes are found along the lymph vessels, like beads on a string. Every organ in the body has lymph nodes and lymph vessels to help remove wastes from cells. There are major groups of lymph nodes in each armpit, at the inside of each elbow, in each groin region, at the back of each knee, and in the neck.

Lymph nodes serve the following purposes:

1. To identify anything that does not belong in the body (bacteria, viruses) and to start the immune response by making different cell to fight invaders.
2. To store things that should not be traveling through the body, such as coal dust or cancer cells.
3. To remove some of the water from the lymph fluid.

Will I Get lymphedema?

It is not possible to predict who will get lymphedema. It is suggested that has a lot to do with how many lymphatics you are born with and how much damage was done. Once the damage is done, your risk of developing lymphedema increases. However, it depends on how many lymphatics you originally had and what percentage are not working now. The idea is for you to have enough information to reduce you risk of developing lymphedema or to prevent it from getting worse.

When Should I Call My Healthcare Provider?

- *When you notice any swelling, with or without pain, that lasts for 1-2 weeks.
- *When any part of your affected limb feels hot, is red, or swells suddenly.
- *When you are running a temperature over 100.5 degrees that is not related to a cold or the flu.

How Do I Help Prevent and Control Lymphedema?

- *Reduce swelling after surgery or radiation
 1. Use your affected body part for daily activities.
 2. Elevate affected body part above heart level.
 3. Exercise the affected body part as directed by your doctor/therapist.
- *Avoid infection
 1. **No IV's or needlesticks** in affected limb.
 2. Keep hands/cuticles well cared for (to prevent broken or cracked skin)