

INFECTION PREVENTION

Infection prevention is the top priority if you have lymphedema. Infection is an increased risk in persons with lymphedema due to two factors: (1) impaired lymph transport means there is an impaired immune response in the body area affected by the impaired lymph flow and, (2) the accumulation of stagnant, protein-rich fluid seen in lymphedema creates a rich environment for the spread of bacteria. Also, each additional infection further impairs lymph flow, increasing future risks. Fortunately, daily attention to your skin will greatly reduce the risk of infection.

Meticulous Skin and Nail Care: This is the simplest and most effective way to help prevent infection. It can be easily incorporated into your daily routine. Inspect your skin closely, looking for signs of infection or skin injury. Wash thoroughly the entire skin surface. You can moderately scrub firm tissues and gently cleanse softer, more tender areas. Rinse well, then dry the skin well, especially between the toes/fingers and in any skin folds. Use a good, low pH lotion (generally 4.5-6.0) to moisturize the skin. You may consider a skin powder to address itching and more fragile, moist skin areas.

Avoiding Skin Injury: Most skin infections are caused by an infectious agent entering the body through a break in the skin. You can avoid most infections by taking care to avoid skin injury. Therefore, it is advised that you: wear gloves when working outdoors, avoid sunburns, avoid pet scratches and insect bites, wear long sleeves or pants, keep feet covered, avoid injuries in the kitchen such as burns or cuts, use electric rather than blade razors for shaving, avoid injections and blood draws in the at-risk limb, take care during nail care to avoid cutting the skin.

If You Injure the Skin: Early management is the key: wash the affected area with simple soap and water, dry well, apply a small amount of topical antibiotic, and cover the wound. Inspect the wound for redness and pain and repeat the above steps daily. If the redness and pain increase, seek medical attention.

Signs of Infection: The cardinal signs of infection are **redness, localized swelling, pain and heat**. Two other important signs may be **fever** and **red streaks** on the limb. The redness may start small and have well-defined, map-like borders, but may also present with a blotchy appearance. Redness that increases in size should be a concern. One cardinal sign presenting alone is not likely to be an infection, but when pain and increased temperature of the skin are combined with redness there is a strong risk of infection. Fever and red streaks are signs that, with the other signs, an infection has spread beyond local tissues and immediate medical attention is indicated.

What to Do if You Think You Have an Infection: When in doubt, always seek medical attention. If you suspect you have an infection, call your physician to ask for an appointment that day. If they are unable to see you that day, then you must go to an urgent care center or to the emergency room. The important concern at this point is to treat the potential infection as soon as possible. Because untreated infections can progress quickly, it is unwise to let too much time pass before receiving medical attention.

Good skin care is relatively simple and not time consuming. With a little practice it will become second nature and you can feel confident you will avoid serious infection. If you ever have any questions, please feel free to call your lymphedema specialist.