Lymphedema Prevention after Breast Surgery

General Instructions
Lymphedema is the build-up (retention) of lymphatic fluid just beneath the skin that causes swelling (edema) typically in the extremities (arms or legs). The best treatment for lymphedema is prevention of swelling.

Lymphedema Prevention: Arm and Hand Movement
You may:
- For several weeks after surgery, when lying down, prop your arm up on a pillow above the level of the heart to help drain the lymphatic fluid. Elevation of the arm helps reduce swelling.
- **Day**: Raising the arm above the level of the heart by propping it on a pillow for 45 minutes several times a day will usually reduce most lymphedema.
- **Night**: Sleep with the arm elevated on a pillow.
- Avoid using your arm and hand in a dependent position (below the level of the heart) for long periods of time. If you need to perform a task of this sort, periodically hold your arms above your head to promote drainage.
- Make a fist or squeeze a small rubber ball in your hand repetitively for two to three minutes several times a day to assist the accumulated fluid in returning to general circulation.

Exercise
- Exercise is essential to restore normal use of your surgical arm.
- Exercise to the point of some discomfort but not pain.
- Do not lift, push or pull more than two or three pounds with your surgical arm for the first few weeks after surgery.

Mobility from Bed
Getting in and out of bed using the “Log Roll Technique”
- Start in a supine position (lying flat on your back).
- Raise your knees so the bottoms of your feet are on the surface of the bed.
- Roll onto your side opposite of your surgical arm.
- Let your feet and bottom half of your legs (from the knees down to your feet) hang off the edge of the bed.
- Use your non-surgical arm to push yourself up from the bed into sitting.

Top Tips to Remember
- **Prevention**: The best treatment for lymphedema is prevention of swelling.
- **Treatment**: The first treatment for swelling is to elevate your surgical arm.
- **Elevation**: When lying down, prop your arm up on a pillow above the level of your heart.
- **Exercise**: Moving your surgical arm is essential to restore normal use.
- **Protection**: Protect your surgical arm from injury and infection.
- **Hydration**: Drink plenty of fluids.
- **Surgical Massage**: Start a routine of daily surgical scar massage about four weeks after surgery.
- **Infection**: Immediately report any sign of infection in your surgical arm.
- **Do not ignore the signs of lymphedema. If signs of lymphedema persist in your surgical arm (or hand) after several days of elevation, call your physician.**

Notify your physician
Do not ignore the signs of lymphedema. If any of the following persist in your surgical arm (or hand) after several days of elevation, call your physician:
- swelling • redness • warmth • fullness • tightness • heaviness • tingling

summahealth.org/breastcenter
Injury and Infection Prevention: Do’s and Don’ts

Do Not:
• Lift, push or pull more than two or three pounds with your surgical arm for the first few weeks after surgery.
• Allow the surgical arm to be used for blood pressure checks, blood samples or injections. Ask your nurse for a pink wristband for the wrist of your surgical arm as a reminder to all your healthcare providers.
• Wear anything tight on the surgical arm or hand, such as rings, watches or bracelets.
• Smoke. But if you do smoke, do not hold a cigarette in your surgical hand.
• Cut your cuticles. Instead, keep hands soft by using hand lotion regularly. Avoid nail salons that use rotary files which could injure cuticles.
• Carry heavy packages or purses on the side of your surgery.

Do:
• Wear protective gloves when working in the garden, washing dishes, or using any irritating chemicals, such as hair dye or cleaning products.
• Avoid burns and cuts when cooking.
• Wash all cuts or injuries with antibacterial soap, apply an antibiotic medication and cover the area with sterile gauze or an adhesive bandage until the wound heals.
• Avoid extreme temperature, hot tubs, saunas and hot baths and showers.
• Avoid sunburn. Wear long sleeves or sunscreen at all times when in direct sunlight.
• Use a thimble when sewing.
• Avoid insect bites by wearing insect repellent.
• Be careful with animals. Avoid scratches.
• Use an electric shaver under your arm.
• Use low pH lotions.

Surgical Scar Massage
During the first four weeks after surgery, your surgical incision will heal and will eventually turn into a scar. Scars form fibrous (thickened) tissues that are firm and do not stretch or move easily. The goal of surgical scar massage is to soften and restore pliability (flexibility) to the scar area. This is especially important if you are having reconstructive surgery.

Instructions For Scar Massage:
• Start four weeks after surgery.
• Lubricate your scar with vitamin E, sesame, almond or other natural oil.
• Use your index (pointer) and middle fingers to gently rub across the scar making small, round circles.
• Do not rub along the length of the scar.
• Massage the area for several minutes each day.
• Continue until the scar is soft and moves easily.


For more information, visit summahealth.org/breastcenter