



September, 2004

St. Mary's - San Francisco's Only Hospital-Based Lymphedema Treatment Program

Debbie Gee, BSN

The incidence of lymphedema in the United States is estimated at 2.5 million, yet more than 100 million people are affected worldwide. This abnormal accumulation of protein-rich fluid in the interstitial tissue can cause swelling, most often in the arm(s) and/or leg(s), and occasionally in other parts of the body. Left untreated, lymphedema can adversely affect a person's quality of life by affecting functional mobility, causing discomfort, infections, and thickening of tissues and skin changes, and making it impossible to wear normal clothing or shoes.

Lymphedema can develop following surgery or radiation near lymph nodes, or as a result of obesity, filariasis, tumors, chronic venous insufficiency, trauma and chronic infections that damage the lymphatic system (secondary lymphedema). For some, lymphedema is a congenital condition that can occur at any age, including in-vitro. In these cases, it is a result of lymphatic dysplasia (primary lymphedema).

In the U.S., breast cancer treatment is the most common cause of lymphedema. In the 1970s, when the treatment norm for breast cancer was a radical mastectomy, complete lymph node dissection and massive radiation treatments, up to 70 percent of women developed lymphedema. Today, with breast-conserving surgeries, sentinel node biopsies and decreased radiation strength, less than 30 percent of persons will develop lymphedema following breast cancer.

Regardless of how a patient contracts lymphedema, seeking care as soon as possible can make an enormous difference in a person's quality of life.

St. Mary's Comprehensive Lymphedema Program

Until recently, many sufferers of this chronic condition were told that there was nothing that could be done for them. Some were referred for compression garments while others were prescribed diuretics to reduce the swelling. Now, more and more people are being referred to lymphedema specialty programs such as the one at St. Mary's Medical Center-the only hospital-based lymphedema treatment program in San Francisco.

St. Mary's Medical Center started its lymphedema program in 2001 to address the growing number of women being treated for breast cancer. In its first year, St. Mary's treated women with breast cancer almost exclusively. Now, just three years later, St. Mary's three physical therapists have treated more than 300 lymphedema patients-70 percent of whom were treated for breast cancer, with the others seeking care for other forms of secondary lymphedema or primary lymphedema.

Complete Decongestive Therapy

St. Mary's lymphedema specialists use a highly effective treatment method called complete decongestive therapy (CDT) to manage lymphedema. CDT can help patients reduce their swelling to normal or near normal size and maintain that reduction. It can also promote wound healing, reduce the risk for infections, soften skin texture and improve health. Most important, CDT can improve a patient's quality of life functionally.

The results of complete decongestive therapy can be dramatic. One young patient, who developed lymphedema as an infant, was only able to wear tennis shoes because of her swollen feet. After being treated by St. Mary's lymphedema specialists, she can wear regular shoes like other teenagers. Another patient with Stage III lymphedema has seen more than a 13-cm reduction in the size of her leg within the first two weeks.

On a patient's first visit, St. Mary's physical therapy staff conducts a patient evaluation and takes a baseline measurement of the affected areas. At a typical appointment, St. Mary's lymphedema specialists use a gentle massage technique to stimulate the lymph node area and redirect lymph fluid to other regions of the body, thus reducing buildup and swelling in the affected area. Patients are bandaged for 24-hour increments during the reduction phase. When the desired reduction has been achieved, patients are fitted for compression garments that they must wear during the day. Depending on the severity of their condition, some patients must continue to wear bandages at night or other appropriate nighttime garments. Generally, patients with lymphedema must follow a prescribed management protocol for the rest of their lives to control their condition.

As with other chronic illnesses such as diabetes, patients are taught a number of self-management skills such as massage and bandaging. The therapists also educate patients about their condition and discuss tips for exercising safely, infection prevention and air travel. St. Mary's therapists also train family members, friends and/or caregivers.

"We begin teaching patients self-management skills at every visit," says Susan Yip, PT, lymphedema specialist at St. Mary's. "We try to give them all the knowledge we can so they can be self-reliant to manage their lymphedema," she adds.

Preventing lymphedema

One of the most underutilized aspects of St. Mary's lymphedema treatment program is prevention education. Patients who have had surgery or radiation near a lymph node should have a postoperative consult with a lymphedema specialist to learn how to potentially prevent lymphedema from ever occurring, says Yip. "If we educate patients early and teach them self-management techniques, we can prevent lymphedema in most cases."

Patients who seek help at the very first signs of swelling have the best chance of preventing lymphedema from worsening and are less likely to see a recurrence. Unfortunately, most patients seek treatment when their disease has already progressed to Stage II, where their swelling doesn't spontaneously go away, says Sue Frohreich, PT, lymphedema specialist at St. Mary's.

One of St. Mary's current patients had been to two different doctors about her swollen arm, and was told there was nothing that could be done. She followed up with her breast cancer surgeon, who immediately referred her to St. Mary's. After just four sessions, her arm has reduced in size by half.

At this time, there is no cure for lymphedema, but it can be effectively managed through clinical treatment, education and individual care at home. St. Mary's Comprehensive Lymphedema Program accepts all forms of insurance. For more information, call (415) 750-8151 or visit stmarysmedicalcenter.org

Debbie Gee, RN, is vice president of Surgical Services and Business Development at St. Mary's Medical Center in San Francisco. In this position, she oversees all Imaging Services, Surgical Services, Endoscopy, Cardiology, Spine Center, Speech, OT and Physical Therapies and Inpatient Physical Rehabilitation. She joined St. Mary's in 2001 as director of Surgical Services. She is an active member of AORN and AHRA and has published surgical protocols for nursing and technicians.