

Occupational Therapy Coordinating Organizing Committee



Project Group on Oncology & Palliative Care for

Patient with Breast Cancer

Post-mastectomy : the facts

Mastectomy, radiotherapy and chemotherapy are common treatment for breast cancer. The whole breast or part of the breast, lymph nodes, muscles may be removed during surgery. The extent of surgery depends upon the spread of cancer. Please consult your surgeon for details.

Symptoms following mastectomy

1. Lymphoedema

- ◆ Commonly found at shoulder, back and upper limb of the affected side. Severity varies among patients and depends upon the extent of surgery.
- ◆ It usually occurs approximately six weeks to three years after mastectomy. Sometimes it might occur even after years of surgery.
- ◆ Larger area of involvement (mastectomy and radiotherapy) may increase chance of having lymphoedema.
- ◆ Cause of lymphoedema:
Any disruption to the lymphatic system can result in lymphoedema. Removal of the axillary (underarm) lymph nodes, and radiation to the axilla (causing scarring) hinders the lymphatic system's ability to transport lymph fluid. Risk is increased if you were overweight, or if you had a large accumulation of protein fluid or an infection after surgery.
- ◆ Lymphoedema causes cosmetic disfigurement, limits functional ability of arm and affects daily living. It can even lead to cellulites and lymphangitis. Reduction of lymphoedema is of utmost importance.

2. For some patients, the surgical scar may become hypertrophic and symptomatic, firm, raised, pain and itchy.
3. Limited upper extremity mobility, arm weakness and fatigue often cause difficulty in household tasks and work.
4. Some patient may experience phantom breast syndrome. This feeling of presence of the excised breast is normal shortly after mastectomy.
5. Brachial plexus disturbance:
Invasion of the tumour cell to the axilla nerve (brachial plexus) may lead to upper limb numbness, pain, weakness and even muscle dystrophy.
6. Skin changes:
Fibrotic and vascular changes may occur in area receiving radiotherapy leading to change in skin texture and colour.
7. Mild persistent chest pain is expected after mastectomy, as a result of swelling, muscle stiffness and skin tightness. If the pain persists for months or if the pain intensity increase, medical consultation is advised.
8. After mastectomy, the imbalance of the body weight may cause muscle aches, pains and fatigue in the neck, shoulder and back muscles.

Occupational Therapist will perform assessment regarding the above conditions and prescribe treatment accordingly. Please consult your Occupational Therapist for details.

Rehabilitation

1. Breast prosthesis

Breast prosthesis made of sponge or silicone helps to restore cosmetic appearance, maintain balance of breast and prevent neck, shoulder and back pain.



2. Pressure garment

Based on the extent and site of swelling, occupational therapist will prescribe pressure garment to control lymphoedema. Pressure garment reduce excessive body fluid entering the tissues and can maintain any previous reduction. When there is lymphoedema, pressure garment must be worn for 24 hours except bathing or swimming.



3. Functional Activity

Restoration of active range of motion and activity endurance is very important for daily activities. It is usually recommended to start exercise under the supervision of health professional. The following pictures illustrated some common upper limb activities that are important for managing your daily tasks, such as reaching up your arm to high level for items retrieval; reach behind your neck for fastening of necklace and handling zip at the back; reaching behind your back for fastening bra-straps or during bathing, etc. To enhance the rehabilitation outcome, please consult your Occupational Therapist regarding your customized activity program and regime.



4. Health Qigong program — Ba Duan Jin

Qigong has long been regarded as a form of “mind-body” intervention, which simultaneously exercises the “mind” and the “body” for treating various chronic diseases and promoting healthy life. The practice of Health Qigong is based on the principle of integrating and harmonizing one’s mind, breath, posture and movement. In views of its safety, minimal cost and potential clinical benefit, it is supported that health qigong can be advocated as an adjunctive therapy for people with chronic conditions.

The Ba Duan Jin is a type of qigong activity that involves lots of gently stretching activities of the upper body and upper limbs together with coordinated breathing. These movements not only help to maintain flexibility of your joints. In addition, the gentle muscle contraction promotes interstitial fluid/lymph flow, which helps to prevent/control lymphoedema.



Some Occupational Therapy Departments offer Health Qigong program. Occupational Therapist will help you gradually upgrade the activities and tailor-made to your own condition. Please consult your Occupational Therapist for details.

Points to note for Daily Activities

1. Avoid tight rings, bracelets or sleeves on the affected arm. Also avoid pressure on the shoulder of the affected arm from shoulder bags or backpacks since these cause restriction to the lymphatic circulation
2. Avoid strenuous work by the affected arm like lifting/pushing/pulling heavy load, since static contraction of the muscle together with the increase in blood pressure will further hinder the lymphatic return causing increase in oedema of the affected arm.
3. Avoid injections, vaccinations, measurement of blood pressure or taking of blood samples on your affected arm. Vaccination wound may lead to infection. Constriction to upper limb during measurement of blood pressure may cause restriction to lymphatic circulation.
4. Avoid temperature extremes while bathing, showering or washing dishes. No saunas or hot tubs. If the limb aches, do not apply heat to relieve the discomfort. This increase in loading of the lymphatic system and will worsen the oedema.
5. Avoid bruises, cuts, burns (including sunburn), insect bites, pet scratches, and sprains. Check your arm regularly for scratches, especially if sensation is impaired. Wear gloves when doing any activity that may cause injury such as housework, or hobbies. Put on long sleeved clothes and use umbrella/sun block lotion for outdoor activities.
6. Keep your skin moisturized as abrasive wound is common in dry skin. This may led to infection.
7. Be sure to wear an appropriate compression sleeve and hand glove when traveling by airplane. As pressure inside the plane is slightly lower than the atmospheric pressure, this decrease in air pressure can cause the arm to swell. You can use a pillow to elevate your arm. Try to keep gentle active exercise to avoid lymphoedema occur.
8. Massage in the direction from hand to shoulder is helpful.
9. Do exercise regularly. The lymphatic system depends on muscle contractions and joint movements to stimulate flow. Swimming is good as this also has a cooling effect. Gentle exercise involving coordinated breathing like Tai Chi and Qi Gong are recommended.
10. Maintain good nutrition and a healthy body weight. Lymphoedema is more common and harder to control in overweight women.
11. Contact your physician if there is a sudden increase in lymphoedema, tenderness or any sign of infection like redness or firmness.