

# Answering Your Questions...

By Janice Yurick

**Q** As a recent breast cancer survivor, how will I know if I am developing lymphedema?

**A** Lymphedema is a type of swelling that can occur if the lymphatic system is damaged or impaired. Lymphedema is regional; swelling is localized to just the area that has limited drainage capacity. In breast cancer associated lymphedema, the swelling would be limited to any part of the arm, hand or chest wall on the side of the cancer, surgery and radiation therapy. If you develop swelling in any other part of your body, it likely has another cause.



When lymphedema is first forming, patients will often report a feeling of heaviness or fullness in the affected area. As more fluid collects in the tissue, you may begin to see the swelling. The swelling may be less in the morning or when you elevate your arm. Simple observation can be an effective way of determining if you are developing lymphedema.

Swelling in the hand can obscure the tendons and veins on the back of the hand so that they are more difficult to see. Compare one hand to the other. If you make a fist, you may notice that the peaks and valleys at the knuckles are lost. You may notice that the sleeves on your clothes

and your rings and watches are tighter on one side than the other. A good way to check your arm is to stand in front of a mirror, put your hands on your shoulders and look at your elbow area. A sign of swelling will be fullness around the elbow. If you think that you are developing lymphedema, report this immediately to your doctor. Early assessment and treatment by a healthcare provider is the most effective way of managing lymphedema.

**Q** I have lymphedema and was advised to avoid heat sources such as hot tubs and saunas. Can you tell me why?

**A** There are a number of recommendations made to lymphedema patients in an effort to reduce the risk of their lymphedema increasing. Clinical wisdom and reasoning most often forms the basis of these recommendations rather than formal medical research. Lymphedema patients are often advised to avoid or limit exposure to extreme heat sources such as hot tubs, saunas and steam rooms because of how the human body responds to overheating. One of the things that the body does in an effort to cool the body is to shift blood from the center out towards the extremities and the surface or skin. This will increase the overall fluid load that the lymphatic system has to deal with. If you have lymphedema in your arm or



leg, this adds extra strain on an already struggling lymphatic system. Additionally, when heated, blood vessels vasodilate or expand. This allows more fluid to escape out of the vessel into the tissue spaces, compounding the problem for the lymphatic system and potentially making your lymphedema worse.

Consider too the complication of infection risk posed by hot tubs, saunas and steam rooms for lymphedema patients. Warm, moist environments are ideal breeding grounds for micro-organisms (germs) which have the potential to cause an infection, a serious and sometimes difficult problem to treat in lymphedema patients.

As we have no hard research evidence to specifically guide this recommendation, it is difficult to say exactly how much heat you can or cannot safely tolerate. For example, it may be reasonable to go into a hot tub, with some common sense precautions such as lowering the temperature of the water, limiting the time you are in the tub or keeping your lymphedematous limb out of the water. Be sure to stay well hydrated and if you start to sweat, a sign that your body is too hot, get out. Be sure to clean and moisturize your limb upon exiting the hot tub. The most cautious approach is to completely stay out of any environment that overheats your body. 

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