

Relieving lymphedema

BY ALICE ASHMORE AND
RENÉE SKOGLUND
STAFF WRITERS
Aashmore@oe.com; skoglund@oe.com

When Nora Cain developed a swollen right arm a number of years after a mastectomy, she resorted to wearing long sleeves to hide the unsightly condition.

"I always wore long sleeves and felt rather self-conscious," she said. After living with the condition for several years, Cain learned she was suffering from lymphedema, a treatable condition that can occur after a mastectomy. Cain had a radical mastectomy in the early 1990s.

"A lot of people tell me that they won't wear short-sleeved shirts," said Colleen O'Connell, an occupational therapist with Botsford General Hospital's Comprehensive Lymphedema Management Services. "Not only have they lost their breast, but they have a swollen arm to deal with as well."

Causes of lymphedema

The function of the lymphatic system is to uptake body fluids, filter them through the lymph nodes and process them to the venous system. When this process is interrupted, swelling can occur.

"Often times a trauma can upset the lymph glands, especially after a mastectomy or a lumpectomy," said Ann Engelgau, manager of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Services for Botsford General Hospital in Farmington Hills.

An American Cancer Society study reported "the presence of lymphedema to some degree in up to 30 percent of women who underwent the traditional axillary surgery (involving removal of lymph glands)."

Lymphedema does not happen to everyone who undergoes a mastectomy, said O'Connell. "In some people it is very mild and stays mild."

However, in some cases, a limb can swell to more than double the normal size.

Karen Jones, an occupational therapist with the Lymphedema Clinic at St. Joseph Mercy Health System, told of one patient whose lymphedema had become debilitating.

"After her radical mastectomy, she had no use of her arm at all. Her fingers were like sausages. She had been like that for 12 years."

The woman was scheduled to have "debulking" surgery, which Jones described as "traumatic," leaving the skin adhering to the muscle tissue and looking skeletal. "Only in extreme cases should it be done," said Jones.

The woman was referred to Jones after she had a heart attack and couldn't have surgery. "After two weeks (of treatment) she came in and said, 'I lost six pounds.' She was just amazed," said Jones.

Treatment

"Awareness of lymphedema has come a long way over the past few years," said Sarah Gilbert, director, Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at St. Mary Hospital. "Therapy treatments are individualized to maximize effectiveness and lifelong management."

The "decongestive lymphatic therapy" practiced at St. Mary Mercy includes a specific massage technique that requires specialized training by the therapist. Education about skin care and limb protection, bandaging, and exercise are the other components of treatment and management. This approach is currently the most effective and least invasive method of treating lymphedema, said Gilbert.

The gentle massage technique helps open up a clogged lymphatic system. Fluid that has accumulated in the swollen arm can again flow through the lymphatic vessels and empty into the circulatory system, and eventually be eliminated from the body.

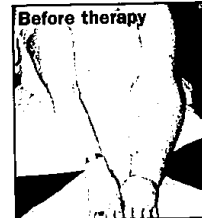
"Patients are taught bandaging and gentle exercise routines to protect further swelling in their limbs and maintain the reduction in swelling that was achieved with treatment," said Lori Gladden, a physical therapist at St. Mary Mercy Hospital in Livonia who has been trained in manual lymphatic drainage.

Engelgau describes the Botsford program as a "structured massage and exercise program." The therapy program uses as a form of massage called the Voder's method, which follows the pathway of the lymph glands to move the fluid through the lymph system.

"I do manual lymphatic treatment," O'Connell said. "It's a light massage that stimulates the lymphatic system to move fluid. A session can go from an hour to an hour and a half."

The Botsford Lymphedema Management Program is "an entire lifestyle program," said Engelgau. "We really emphasize the strong importance of drinking a lot of water. It maintains fluid balances."

Clients are also given at-home exercises and taught both self-massage techniques and encouraged to use compression garments. The length of treatment varies with the results.



Before therapy
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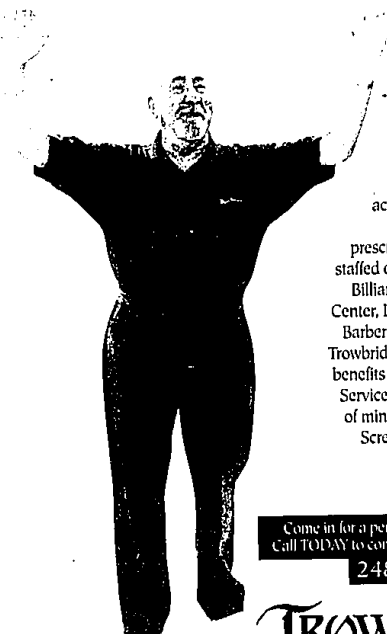
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