Early Signs of Lymphedema

Treatment for lymphedema is most successful if it is started early. Waiting can extend the time required for treatment and also limit the success of treatment. If you have had surgery and/or radiation that involve your lymphatic system, you are at risk for developing lymphedema. Here are some signs to look for:

Early Signs and Symptoms of Lymphedema in the Arm:

1. Feelings of tension in the skin
2. Puffiness in arms
3. Heaviness of arm when moving it
4. Swelling in breast area
5. Swelling in the axilla (arm pit)
6. Rings, watches or clothing no longer fit the way they did.

What to Do to See if You Might Have Symptoms:

1. Make a fist with each hand. Look between the knuckles. Look to see if there is more puffiness on one side than the other.
2. Bend both elbows and point them at a mirror in front of you. Do they look the same or is one side larger than the other?
3. Become familiar with how the back of your hands look, especially the veins and tendons on the hand. Check occasionally to see if they look different. These are not the only signs and symptoms but are the more common and easiest to monitor and identify. In general, get to know your body and what is normal for you.

What to Do If You Notice Any of the Above?

Bring these issues to the attention of your care provider. If they think it is appropriate, he or she can refer you to a clinic that specializes in the treatment of lymphedema.

Revised December 2017