

Head and Neck Lymphedema: Skin Care

For individuals at risk of developing lymphedema, or who have been diagnosed with lymphedema following surgery and/or radiation treatment for head and neck cancer, it is important to protect your skin and keep it free of infection. That is because individuals with lymphedema are at a higher risk for infection to develop, which can cause swelling and/or make your symptoms of swelling worse.

Follow these tips to keep your skin healthy and minimize your risk of infection

Protect and Moisturize:

- Keep your skin clean using mild soap and warm (not hot) water.
- Dry your skin well with a clean towel or cloth and use a gentle patting motion when drying your skin so you do not irritate your skin.
- Moisturize daily using unscented lotions or creams that are dermatologist approved and appropriate for sensitive skin. This will keep your skin from cracking and help reduce the risk of bacteria getting under the skin.

Avoid Exposure:

- Protect your skin from the sun. Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen (SPF 30). Mineral sunscreens offer better protection from UVA and UVB rays (compared to chemical sunscreens) so be sure to check the label.
- Try to stay out of the sun between 10am and 4pm when the UV rays are the strongest.
- Avoid your skin being exposed to extreme temperatures by wearing appropriate clothing that protects your skin from the sun and from the wind and/or cold temperatures of winter.
- Placing ice packs or heating pads directly on the skin can cause tissue damage and increase superficial swelling.

Know the Signs of Infection:

- All cuts to the head and neck area should be washed, treated with an antibiotic ointment, covered with a bandage, and monitored for infection.
- If you have pets, keep their claws trimmed and try to avoid scratches, especially to your head and neck.
- Prevent insect bites with repellent and by wearing proper clothing that covers your skin when outdoors. Insect bites can introduce bacteria into your body and cause localized swelling and/or infection.
- It is recommended to use electric razors when grooming facial hair to avoid cuts from a razor blade.
- Care should be taken with waxing, electrolysis, or any other methods of hair removal that could cause any trauma or break in the skin of the head and neck.