

What every woman should know about breast cancer related lymphedema



Francis Bevern, (name changed to protect patient identity) had to stop wearing her wedding ring. Even though her husband had died a few years back, she wanted to keep wearing the ring as a reminder of their relationship. But taking off the band was a necessary step because it didn't fit her swelling finger. She had trouble fitting into her jacket and blouse sleeves and she experienced an odd and restrictive feeling in her arm and shoulder.

Stepping on her scale revealed she hadn't gained any weight and she started to question the reasons for her newfound swelling. At that time she didn't know that her recent breast cancer surgery had put her at risk for developing infections and fluid build-up in her arm due to breast cancer related lymphedema (BCRL).

The highest incidence of lymphedema, a common and serious condition affecting at least three million Americans, is observed following breast cancer surgery, particularly among those patients who undergo radiation therapy following the removal of axillary lymph nodes. Many of these individuals will develop (BCRL).

BCRL is one of the most concerning and prevalent secondary complications of breast cancer treatments. "Research indicates that approximately 25 percent of patients develop lymphedema after breast cancer surgery. But for those who also undergo radiation therapy, the development of lymphedema increases to 38 percent," according to the American Physical Therapy Association's - "Physical Therapy Journal."

Lymphedema is a condition characterized by swelling in one or more extremities that result from impaired flow of the lymphatic system. It's a complex matrix of specialized glands and vessels that spans throughout our bodies.

A very simplistic example of this system can be likened to water going through a heavy duty nylon stocking. If the hosiery gets kinked, fluid would seep out above the kink. And fluid will descend with time and gravity.