



## Breast Cancer: Knowing the Facts

The good news, reported by the American Cancer Society this month is that death rates from breast cancer have declined almost 40% between 1989 and 2015. The report, the latest to document a long-term reduction in breast-cancer mortality, attributed the declines to both improvements in treatments and to early detection by mammography. Instead of only one or two options, today there are many treatment choices that fight the complex mix of cells in each individual cancer. However, the decisions to be made — surgery, then possibly radiation, hormonal (anti-estrogen) therapy, and/or chemotherapy can be *overwhelming*. As a 3- time survivor, I know first-hand that no matter which treatment(s) you choose it is important to be informed about every aspect of the treatment. Be informed and take the time to understand the possible side effects of each treatment option and how they may affect your life. Long-term and late side effects may include fatigue, headaches, pain and numbness (peripheral neuropathy), dental issues, musculoskeletal symptoms, bone loss, osteoporosis, heart problems and **lymphedema**, which, in my opinion, is one of the least expected and understood side effects of breast cancer treatments.

**Lymphedema** is an abnormal, annoying and sometimes painful swelling that can develop in the arm, hand, breast, or torso on the side where your lymph nodes were removed. It can occur early on or years following treatments. Lymphedema develops when the lymph vessels in an area are no longer able to carry all the fluid away from the area. If this happens, the fluid can build up and cause uncomfortable swelling. It takes time to figure out the best plan to keep the swelling under control. Find a good lymphedema therapist (important) and talk about problems and what the best treatment will be for you. Each situation can be different, so an experienced professional's help is vital. Options include Manual lymphatic drainage (MLD) which is a gentle form of massage provided by an experienced lymphedema therapist. Treatment may also include skin care, light exercises to help stimulate the lymphatic system. Compression bandages, pumps, or garments (e.g., sleeves, stockings) to help prevent additional fluid from accumulating in the tissue may be recommended. At times, medications may help reduce inflammation, prevent blood clots and treat infections.

Infections can become serious after just the tiniest of hangnails or scratches from gardening. Doctors encourage patients to always address unusual changes or symptoms in lymphedema: such as an increase in skin temperature or a change in skin color, which can be the first signs of cellulitis, a very dangerous infection. Acute Cellulitis is one of the complications of lymphedema. The first sign is increased or different quality of pain involving the lymphedema limb. Patients often describe this as a "flu like symptom or an ache" involving the Lymphedema arm or leg. This is usually followed by sudden onset redness, red streaks or blotches on the involved limb. It will be hot and the patient may experience chills with a high fever. If a fever is present (101+) it is important to go to emergency immediately.

If you are facing treatment that could harm your lymph nodes, it is good to know that you have resources and qualified experts to help you learn about and manage lymphedema. If you think you may be at risk, consult your health care team and get a head start with education. It will make a world of difference. Suggested website: National Lymphedema Network which provides educational materials and community referrals. [www.lymphnet.org](http://www.lymphnet.org)



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