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Understanding Skin Changes from Lymphedema: Key Signs and What to Watch For

Introduction

Lymphedema, a chronic condition caused by impaired lymphatic drainage, often affects the arms or legs but can occur in any body area. When the lymphatic system isn't functioning properly, fluid builds up in the tissues, causing swelling and other skin changes. These changes are not just cosmetic concerns; they can signal worsening lymphedema, infection, or complications. Recognizing early signs of skin changes is crucial in managing the condition effectively. Here's what to look for if you or a loved one is dealing with lymphedema.

1. Swelling and Edema

The most common sign of lymphedema is persistent swelling, typically in the limbs. This swelling often begins subtly and can worsen over time. Initially, the swelling may be soft and pit when pressed (pitting edema). Still, as lymphedema progresses, the skin can become firmer and thicker due to fibrosis (hardening of the skin tissue). Over time, chronic swelling can lead to significant skin and tissue changes.

2. Skin Texture Changes

One hallmark of advancing lymphedema is a noticeable change in skin texture. The skin may feel rougher and thicker, a condition known as **hyperkeratosis**. This thickened, hardened skin can be prone to small, wart-like growths. Additionally, the skin may develop a leathery feel, becoming less pliable due to prolonged fluid buildup and fibrosis.

3. Dryness and Cracking

The skin affected by lymphedema is often drier than usual, leading to cracks or fissures. These tiny cracks can create an entry point for bacteria, making the skin more susceptible to infections like **cellulitis** or **erysipelas**. Regular moisturizing is essential for maintaining skin integrity, but be mindful of the types of moisturizers used to avoid irritation.

4. Redness and Discoloration

Chronic inflammation from lymphedema can cause persistent redness or darkening of the skin, often indicating increased blood flow to the affected area. In some cases, the skin may appear darker or develop patches of brown discoloration, known as **hemosiderin staining**, due to iron deposits from broken-down blood cells. This is a sign that blood circulation in the area may be impaired, worsening swelling and skin damage.

5. Skin Folds and Fissures

As lymphedema progresses, the affected limb or area can develop deep skin folds, which are more common in advanced stages. These folds can trap moisture, leading to irritation and creating an ideal environment for fungal infections. It's essential to keep skin folds clean and dry and to monitor for any signs of redness or tenderness that might indicate infection.

6. Papillomatosis

Papillomatosis is when small, wart-like growths appear on the skin, often resembling small blisters. These growths respond to the chronic inflammation caused by fluid buildup and are more common in advanced lymphedema cases. They may increase in number and size over time, contributing to further skin irregularities and discomfort.

7. Increased Risk of Infection

Due to compromised skin integrity, individuals with lymphedema are at a higher risk of skin infections. Bacteria can quickly enter the skin through cracks, fissures, or microscopic breaks. Look out for signs of infection, such as warmth, redness, tenderness, and sudden increases in swelling. Cellulitis is particularly common in people with lymphedema and can be severe if not treated promptly.

Tips for Managing Skin Changes

While some skin changes from lymphedema are inevitable, consistent care can minimize their impact and reduce the risk of complications. Here are a few tips:

- **Moisturize Daily:** Regular moisturizing helps prevent dryness and cracking. Use gentle, fragrance-free lotions to avoid irritation.
- **Practice Good Hygiene:** Clean the skin daily and thoroughly dry any folds or creases to prevent fungal infections.
- **Wear Compression Garments:** Compression helps manage swelling and reduce fluid buildup, which can delay skin changes.
- **Watch for Signs of Infection:** Monitor your skin regularly and seek prompt medical care if you notice any signs of infection.
- **Consult a Lymphedema Specialist:** Regular check-ups with a lymphedema specialist can help you monitor any skin changes and adjust your care plan.

Final Thoughts

Skin changes caused by lymphedema can range from mild to severe, but early recognition and consistent management can significantly improve quality of life. By staying vigilant, practicing good skincare, and consulting with healthcare professionals, individuals with lymphedema can minimize these changes and reduce the risk of complications.



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