

# Lymphoedema Help

By Denise Flett

For women newly diagnosed with breast cancer and undergoing treatment, it can be difficult to know where to source information and services for lymphoedema management and treatment in New Zealand.

New Zealand lymphoedema therapists have collaborated to establish a New Zealand lymphoedema website – [www.lymphoedemanz.org.nz](http://www.lymphoedemanz.org.nz) – which has been funded by the New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation.

Due to go live this month, the website will be a useful resource for accessing information about primary and secondary lymphoedema, services and resources in New Zealand, as well as links to reputable international lymphoedema information.

The website will have:

- printable information pages explaining what lymphoedema is, prevention and management,
- international links to resources and information,
- DHB lymphoedema services, and
- a list of NZ National Lymphoedema Therapists.

So, what information does a newly diagnosed or treated woman need to have about lymphoedema?

Firstly, an accurate explanation of which surgical or radiotherapy treatments have involved the lymphatic system is needed, which will enable the risk of lymphoedema for that person to be assessed. Axillary dissection or sentinel node biopsy, and radiotherapy are the most significant factors for risk and can be explained by the surgeon or other members of the multidisciplinary team, such as the breast care nurse or oncologist.

Once a risk assessment has been undertaken, the woman should be given information that will help her take steps to protect against lymphoedema development, and information about the early signs and management of lymphoedema.

## Sources of Information, Support and Treatment in New Zealand

The Lymphoedema Support Network brings lymphoedema people together and provides educational resources. Women can contact the Lymphoedema Support Network Chairperson, Joy Donohoe, for Resource booklets and newsletters by phoning 09 625 6463.

The Christchurch Lymphoedema Support Group is an active group which holds public

meetings with invited speakers four times year at the Christchurch Cancer Society Rooms at 246 Manchester Street. Please phone 3795835 for more information.

The regional Cancer Society Information Nurses and Community Liaison Nurses can be a useful contact for discussions regarding lymphoedema and can send out information or provide referral information. Many of the Cancer Society offices have libraries

[www.lymphoedemanz.org.nz](http://www.lymphoedemanz.org.nz)

website of New Zealand Lymphoedema Therapists



with very up to date information, as well as psychological services with health psychologists. The Auckland Cancer Society has a monthly Lymphoedema Education session – see [www.cancersocietyauckland.co.nz](http://www.cancersocietyauckland.co.nz) for more information.

Many district health boards now have a lymphoedema service as part of their physiotherapy or Breast Clinic Services. Ask if your DHB has a lymphoedema service and ask to be referred for an educational session with the lymphoedema therapist within these departments.

If your DHB does not have a lymphoedema service you may wish to pay for a consultation with a Lymphoedema Therapist in Private Practice. These practitioners are usually physiotherapists, registered nurses or massage therapists that have specially trained in lymphoedema prevention, assessment and management. You can find these therapist by accessing the new New Zealand website – [www.lymphoedemanz.org.nz](http://www.lymphoedemanz.org.nz) – or you can also look on the Australasian Lymphology Association website – <http://lymphology.asn.au> – which has a national register for lymphoedema therapists in Australia and New Zealand.

A consultation with a private therapist usually takes one to one and a half hours and costs between \$60 and \$120. The consultation will generally involve a full explanation of the functioning of the lymphatic system, risk factors for the development of lymphoedema, risk reducing factors, a full assessment, weight, circumferential sequential measurements of the arms and clinical assessment of the skin and tissues. If any lymphoedema is present the therapist may commence Manual

Lymphatic Drainage massage and they may also educate on the technique of self massage called Simple Lymphatic Drainage.

They may also discuss with the individual the use of compression sleeves and prophylactic use of sleeves particularly for flying.

A new assessment tool which is ideal for early breast cancer patients before and after any surgical intervention and radiotherapy is bioimpedance, which is able to determine the amount of fluid within tissues by a simple and non-invasive electrical signal applied to the limbs (a bit like an ECG). The device then compares that amount of fluid between the two arms and comes up with a score which determines if the amount of fluid in the affected arm

is raised. Ideally this measurement should be taken pre-operatively and can then be taken every three months to track if early lymphoedema is developing and facilitate early intervention even before visible changes may be present.

Currently there are only three organisations providing bioimpedance in New Zealand: Waitemata District Health Board, the Auckland Breast Centre in Milford and Ormiston Rd in Auckland, and physiotherapist Kath Vickers in Tauranga ([k.l.vickers@xtra.co.nz](mailto:k.l.vickers@xtra.co.nz))

A range of goods and services providers are also a good source of information about lymphoedema, for example, suppliers and fitters of compression garments and arm sleeves, and bra providers and fitters. Properly fitted bras can help to further reduce impaired lymphatic drainage, and bras recommended following mastectomy and partial mastectomy have been designed to reduce interruption to the lymphatic pathways. Information on entitlements and bra subsidies can be obtained from the Ministry of Health, and breast care nurses can supply a list of national suppliers of compression garments and sleeves; this information will also be on the new Lymphoedema NZ website.

Breast cancer exercise programmes are another excellent source of information. The Encore programme has an education session with a lymphoedema therapist as part of the eight week programme, and the floor and pool exercises are designed to optimise lymphatic drainage and reduce lymphoedema risk. Pink Pilates, following early breast cancer management, is also run under the supervision of a physiotherapist.