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Lymphadema - Many Breast Cancer Patients Struggle With Arm Swelling

SUNDAY, June 12 (HealthDay News) -- Swelling in the arms or hands -- a condition known as lymphedema -- occurred in 55 percent of 580 breast cancer patients after surgical removal of either the breast or the tumor, a new study finds.

Lymphedema was persistent in about a third of the women and those with the swelling reported a lower quality of life than those without the swelling.

"Women don't know about lymphedema," study lead author Electra Paskett, a professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at Ohio State University's School of Public Health, said in a prepared statement.

"When a breast cancer survivor has swelling in her arm, she may immediately think that her cancer has come back. And the swelling, which may occur at any time, is a constant reminder of having had cancer," Paskett said.

The swelling most often occurs on the same side of the body as the breast affected by cancer. Generally, lymphedema is not a sign of cancer recurrence, Paskett said.

The study was presented Saturday at the U.S. Department of Defense's Breast Cancer Research meeting meeting, in Philadelphia.

Lymphedema is caused by a build-up of lymphatic fluid. It's more common among women who had a higher number of lymph nodes removed during surgery. The study also found that being married was associated with a higher risk of lymphedema. The researchers couldn't explain this association.

There is no cure for lymphedema, which can be painful and make it difficult for affected patients to use their arms or hands. Swelling can be reduced through massage or by wearing a compression garment, such as a tight sleeve or glove, that forces lymph fluid out of the hand or arm and back into the body, the researchers said.

More information

The Society for Vascular Surgery has more about lymphedema.