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Prostate Cancer and Lymphedema: Understanding the Link

Introduction

Prostate cancer is one of the leading cancer diagnoses in men, and advances in screening and treatment now allow many to live longer, healthier lives after diagnosis. Yet with longer survivorship comes the challenge of managing treatment-related side effects that can affect quality of life. One of the lesser-known but significant complications is lymphedema—a chronic condition that may develop following prostate cancer surgery or radiation therapy.

What Is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema occurs when the lymphatic system, which helps maintain fluid balance and supports the immune system, becomes damaged or blocked. This leads to a buildup of protein-rich fluid that causes swelling. While lymphedema is often associated with breast cancer survivors, men treated for prostate cancer can also develop it—particularly in the legs, groin, lower abdomen, or genital region.

Why Prostate Cancer Treatment Can Lead to Lymphedema

Several standard treatments for prostate cancer can increase the risk of lymphedema:

- **Lymph Node Removal (Lymphadenectomy):** During prostate cancer surgery, nearby lymph nodes may be removed to determine whether the cancer has spread. This can disrupt lymphatic pathways and reduce the body's ability to move fluid effectively.
- **Radiation Therapy:** Radiation to the pelvic area can scar or damage lymphatic vessels, further impeding lymph flow.
- **Pelvic Surgery:** Any surgical procedure in the lower abdomen or pelvic region may increase the likelihood of lymphatic disruption.

When lymphatic circulation is impaired, fluid may accumulate in surrounding tissues, leading to swelling, discomfort, and sometimes infections.

Recognizing the Signs

Early detection is key. Men recovering from prostate cancer treatment should watch for:

- Swelling in the legs, groin, lower abdomen, or genitals
- A feeling of heaviness or tightness in affected areas
- Recurrent skin infections
- Changes in skin texture, such as hardening or thickening

Prompt medical evaluation is essential, as early intervention can make lymphedema more manageable.

Reducing Risk and Managing Lymphedema

While not all cases can be prevented, there are proactive steps survivors can take:

- **Exercise and Movement:** Gentle, regular activity promotes lymphatic flow and reduces fluid buildup.

- **Skin Care:** Keeping the skin clean and moisturized helps prevent infections, which can worsen swelling.
- **Compression Garments:** Specialized garments or bandages can support fluid movement and help control swelling.
- **Lymphedema Therapy:** Certified therapists provide manual lymphatic drainage (MLD), exercise guidance, and education tailored to each patient.

Living Well Beyond Treatment

Awareness is the first step in addressing prostate cancer-related lymphedema. By recognizing symptoms early and seeking specialized care, men can significantly improve their comfort, mobility, and quality of life. With proper management, lymphedema does not have to define life after prostate cancer.



Interested in taking an ACOLS Course?

The Academy of Lymphatic Studies offers certification courses in lymphedema management and manual lymphatic drainage. CEU's are available for nurses in select states!

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