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The Role of the Oncology Team in Lymphedema Prevention and Care: Why Interdisciplinary Care Matters

Introduction

Lymphedema is one of the most common and often underestimated complications of cancer treatment—especially for individuals treated for breast, gynecologic, or prostate cancers. Despite being preventable or manageable when caught early, many patients still develop lymphedema due to gaps in communication, delayed referrals, or a lack of coordinated care. The **oncology team plays a vital role** in prevention and long-term management.

Understanding Lymphedema in Cancer Care

Lymphedema can develop when lymph nodes or vessels are damaged or removed during surgery or radiation. This disruption leads to fluid buildup, swelling, and changes in skin and tissue health. While it can appear weeks, months, or even years after treatment, the good news is that **early identification and intervention dramatically improve outcomes.**

However, no single provider can manage this alone. Successful prevention and care require **an interdisciplinary** team effort from oncologists and surgeons to physical therapists, nurses, and certified lymphedema therapists.

Building a Team-Based Approach

A strong oncology team integrates lymphedema awareness into every phase of treatment:

- **Oncologists and Surgeons** - Discuss lymphedema risk before treatment, outline surgical or radiation factors that may increase susceptibility, and refer patients for baseline limb measurements or prehabilitation.
- **Radiation and Medical Oncologists** - Monitor for tissue changes, educate about long-term risks, and collaborate with rehabilitation specialists when symptoms arise.
- **Nurses and Nurse Navigators** - Provide consistent patient education, reinforce prevention techniques (like skin care and exercise), and recognize subtle signs of swelling during follow-ups.
- **Physical and Occupational Therapists** - Teach movement and positioning strategies that support lymphatic flow, assess early swelling, and provide targeted interventions.
- **Certified Lymphedema Therapists (CLTs)** - Deliver specialized manual lymph drainage (MLD), compression fitting, and long-term management strategies to maintain comfort and function.

Patients receive **seamless, proactive care** rather than fragmented, reactive treatment when these disciplines communicate and collaborate.

Why Interdisciplinary Care Matters

Lymphedema prevention is not a single action—it's a continuum of care. An interdisciplinary model ensures that:

- Early warning signs are caught quickly.
- Patients receive consistent, evidence-based education.
- Treatment plans are individualized and integrated into cancer recovery.
- Emotional, physical, and functional needs are addressed holistically.

This approach improves patient outcomes, enhances quality of life, reduces complications, and empowers survivors with knowledge and confidence.

Moving Forward

The most effective lymphedema care begins with **communication and collaboration**. When oncology teams work together and lymphedema education is embedded into every phase of cancer care, patients are better protected, informed, and supported in their recovery journey.



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!

For more information, course listings, and to register for an upcoming course, [Click Here!](#)