

LYMPHEDEMA INCIDENCE IN EARLY STAGE BREAST CANCER  
SURVIVORS: SECONDARY ANALYSIS FROM AN ON-GOING QUALITY OF  
LIFE STUDY

Karen Hassey Dow, PhD, RN, FAAN and Victoria W. Loerzel, MSN, RN, OCN®  
University of Central Florida School of Nursing  
Orlando, Florida

Key Words: Lymphedema, Quality of Life, Breast Cancer Survivors

**Purpose/Background:** Lymphedema has a significant impact on quality of life among breast cancer survivors. Incidence of lymphedema ranges from 6% to 62.5%. Despite availability of lymphedema management guidelines, adherence to these guidelines is not well described. In a longitudinal, quality of life intervention research study, early stage breast cancer survivors identified lymphedema as an important concern. However, their knowledge about the prevention, occurrence, and management of lymphedema was very limited. The purpose of this paper is to 1) describe the incidence of lymphedema occurring in subjects in this study; 2) discuss the use of self-care interventions to prevent and manage lymphedema. **Design and Methods:** The on-going parent study uses a quality of life framework to provide a psychoeducational and support intervention for women with early stage breast cancer. Lymphedema is one of the many symptoms evaluated in this study where research nurses discuss lymphedema and provide individual information about the problem. A secondary analysis to examine the problem of lymphedema was conducted from data collected for the first 150 of 250 proposed subjects. **Results:** Reasons why subjects believed that they were not at risk for lymphedema included: 1) physician commented that they were not at risk or it was not a concern for them; and 2) they were unaware of the existence of lymphedema. On analysis, 21.5% (n=33) identified a problem with lymphedema, of which 63.6% had low problems with lymphedema while 24% (n=8) had moderate to severe problems with lymphedema. 79.3% (n=119) of subjects received specific lymphedema information and management tips. Of the 119 subjects, only 40.3% (n=48) used the tips while 58.8% (n=70) did not use the tips at all. Tips included basic strategies to avoid trauma to the affected arm in order to prevent lymphedema. **Discussion:** The majority of subjects desired additional information concerning prevention and management of lymphedema. However, many did not use the information once provided to them. These findings are of concern. While previous research shows that reasons for not using preventive measures may be due to lack of education about lymphedema or a lack of understanding about its occurrence, there is little data that shows why women do practice lymphedema prevention or management. **Implications:** Oncology nurses recognize the potential risk for lymphedema among breast cancer survivors and are at the forefront of efforts to educate their patients about preventive and management measures. Given patients lack of knowledge about their risk for lymphedema and the lack of adherence to current lymphedema guidelines, future research about patient adherence to lymphedema prevention and management are needed.

*Funding: This study is supported by the National Institute of Nursing Research and the Office of Cancer Survivorship, National Cancer Institute (NR05332)*