Lymphedema Podcast.

Ep. 01

What is Lymphedema?

Hello! Welcome to episode one of Lymphedema Podcast. I am so excited to use this platform to help you learn more about lymphedema. If you are listening today it is likely because you were recently told by your doctor that you have lymphedema. After the appointment you probably started Googling “what is lymphedema”...while doing that you probably looked at the images and are now scared to death. Make me a promise that you won’t Google or Web MD search lymphedema for the next week until you have had some time to process. Deal? You have some questions and I hope to answer them. First I want to encourage you. Lymphedema is not a death sentence, you can still live a healthy and active life. Second, there is a learning curve to this disease so allow yourself grace and cut yourself some slack when you don’t get it just right. Ok, now then...let’s get ready to talk about what lymphedema is.

Today’s pilot episode of Lymphedema Podcast is basically the question I get most in the clinic...What is Lymphedema? The questions that follow are usually:

- is there a cure?
- How do I keep it from getting worse?
- Can I still use my_______? Insert whichever body part is affected.

We will get to those too. First let’s start with what Lymphedema is.

Lymphedema is the abnormal buildup of lymph fluid in the region of the body where there has been a dysfunction of the lymphatic system.

Lymph is the fluid that our lymphatic system filters through to remove waste and toxins from the bloodstream. Lymph itself is a clear fluid that consists of proteins, cell fragments, water and fatty acids. On average the human body produces 3 liters of lymph fluid a day. If you don’t drink
a ton of water every day then you may not think 3 liters is a whole lot. The average size of a water bottle is 20 ounces...that is 5 water bottles of fluid a day.

The lymphatic system creates a plexus that covers the entire body, excluding things like teeth, bone marrow, or tissues that do not have a blood supply. I don't know about you but when I think about the word Plexus I think about the people who sell the pink drink and drive a Lexus. This plexus is nothing like that plexus. The plexus we are talking about is basically a mesh like covering. There are holes created by the connecting strands that create the intricate weblike formation. Lymph vessels can be found as superficial as just beneath the skin or as deep as the thoracic duct (google it, it is one of two structures that pass through our diaphragms).

When I say lymphatic system what comes to mind first?? Did you think about the glands in your throat that swell up when you're sick? You're correct! Lymph nodes filter the lymph fluid and produce an immune response when a foreign particle is present. There are countless lymph nodes throughout your body that work day and night to protect you and I from illnesses.

That was a lot of anatomy so let's recap a few things. Lymph fluid is a mixture of water, proteins, and other cell particles the body is constantly filtering. Lymph nodes filter the lymph fluid. The Plexus and lymph vessels carry the lymph fluid through the body.

Now that we have covered the anatomy of the lymphatic system let's talk about what happens if there is a glitch. When there is a break down in the lymphatic system causing lymphedema the body does not know to produce less lymph or to reroute the lymph to avoid the buildup of fluid. There isn't a red light that blinks to indicate a problem, the body continues to function as if nothing happened. The breakdown in the system can be primary or secondary. Primary meaning you were born with a compromised lymphatic system that was able to function before this point. Secondary meaning there was an injury, surgery or infection that caused the dysfunction. If you're doctor has given you a diagnosis of primary lymphedema or secondary
lymphedema, this is no difference in the treatment. Because the body still produces the same amount of lymph, the fluid begins to collect in that region that has the impaired lymphatic system. as an example: a man has been diagnosed with breast cancer. He has a biopsy followed by the removal of 5 lymph nodes from his R under arm. Following radiation he begins to notice swelling in his R hand and is unable to wear his watch comfortably. This is an example of secondary lymphedema.

Our lymphatic system is divided into regions by the watersheds that border them. For the sake of keeping your attention I will not give you a detailed description on the watersheds-- you can research that and then tune in for the episode that will cover watersheds more specifically. That being said....watersheds have a vital role in the lymphatic system, they keep the lymph fluid contained in its region..the example I like to use is Texas is one big state but there are separate and distinct county lines to divide the states regions. Watersheds divide and separate the body in this way. If you are new to lymphedema this may sound crazy and overwhelming...take a deep breath, count to 10 if you need to...this is actually good news. Lymphedema does not spread throughout your body. It is contained in the region where it originates. The watersheds prevent the fluid from actively moving from one region to the other. It is important for me to add here that it is possible and not uncommon to have lymphedema in more than one region... that will be covered in a future episode as well. Let’s review again here before moving on: Lymph fluid is a mixture of water, proteins, and other cell particles the body is constantly filtering. Lymph nodes filter the lymph fluid. The Plexus and lymph vessels carry the lymph fluid through the body. When there is a glitch in the system fluid begins to accumulate in that region. Watersheds divide the body regions to keep the built up fluid from “spilling over” into another region. Another thing I want to review before moving forward are the differences in primary and secondary lymphedema. Primary is genetic or related to another disease you have. Secondary is related to an injury or trauma to the skin that damages the lymphatic structures.
Third: what lymphedema is not--- lymphedema in the legs is often labeled as swelling because the lymphedema may decrease after rest or elevating the legs while sleeping. It is really common to think the swelling is caused by increased salt or being on your feet for too long. Many doctors will prescribe a water pill with no luck in decreasing the swelling. Most of the time people will take one or two water pills for a set amount of time to find that the fluid is still there.

Lymphedema is not the same as retaining fluid from increased sodium intake. Because the lymph fluid is high in protein the water pills don't decrease the amount of lymph fluid being retained. Yes, you will still pee more than before but it is not removing the lymph. It is important to note that you can become dehydrated when taking water pills so be sure to drink plenty of water.

Lymphedema is not swelling from being on your feet too long shopping for black Friday deals. When the legs are involved the swelling is usually at its worst by the end of the day because of gravity. The mornings or after sleep is when it is the least, also because of gravity.

Lymphedema in the arms is most common after breast cancer treatment or an injury--when you have had treatment for breast cancer there are a few things you can do to take precaution however, there is not much you can to prevent lymphedema. After a lumpectomy or lymph node biopsy you are consider in stage zero. Stage zero does not have visible signs of swelling but the lymphatic system has been compromised and has potential to retain lymph fluid in that limb. Lymphedema after breast cancer treatment is not something that you cause by lifting your arms above your head or picking up a small child. It is the result of a damaged system and a side effect of the cancer treatment.

Before we close up here I want to review this section of what lymphedema is not: it is not swelling that can be removed by taking a water pill..or two.Gravity does play a role in the appearance causing it to be worse at the end of the day and better after sleep or laying
down. When related to breast cancer----really cancer treatment in general----is not often a direct result of anything you have done to cause it.

Take aways:

1. Lymphedema is the result of a dysfunction in the lymphatic system.
2. It can occur anywhere there is skin.
3. Lymphedema does not spread from one region to the other, until it becomes a systemic problem.
4. Primary and secondary lymphedema are the two categories of lymphedema.
5. The earlier you begin treatment the better. Lymphedema is manageable and there are people who can help you. Search them out and listen to their (what will sound) crazy advice.

Applications:

1. If you have been diagnosed with lymphedema find a certified lymphedema therapist in your area to help you manage your lymphedema. If there is not one in your area Facebook has some support pages where you can ask a therapist for suggestions.
2. It is not unusual to have lymphedema in more than one region, if you think you have lymphedema in more than one region talk to you doctor or CLT about it. They will be able to clarify this for you. An example of more than one region is if you think you have it in 3 both legs, or head, neck, and, arm.
3. If you have lymphedema in one region it is not likely that it will spread across to another region.

Mother Teresa says “Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty” This podcast is here for you to find friendship and a community for your journey with Lymphedema.
I hope you enjoyed learning more about what lymphedema is. Email me with your story if you would like to share. Lymphedemapodcast@gmail.com or visit the website lymphedemapodcast.com to submit a topic for another episode.