This is episode 05 of Lymphedema Podcast:

Last episode was all about insurance coverage for compression garments so be sure to check it out if you still have insurance coverage questions. Today’s episode is one of the most important topics I think. It is the second most dreaded c-word related to lymphedema. Cellulitis. Once you have it you never forget it and if you have not had it you dread it.

Cellulitis is an infection in the skin. There are many signs and symptoms but three sit at the top of the list. The trifecta of cellulitis are: redness, warm to the touch and growing borders. Growing borders means you outline the redness at 8am and by noon the redness extends past the black outline. Those three are the most common symptoms but they are not the only symptoms. Other symptoms can include: severe malaise, fever and chills, headache, nausea, tender to touch, and rapid progression of symptoms.

- You don’t want to procrastinate if you think you have cellulitis because it can lead to a systemic infection and sepsis. If you have more than 3 of the symptoms I mentioned you definitely need to take action. I would recommend that if you have the 3 primary symptoms (redness, map like border and warm to the touch) to go to an emergency room and remove any compression garments you have been wearing to limit spreading infections. If you suspect you have cellulitis but do not have 3 or more symptoms I
would recommend: monitoring temperature for changes, watch for expanding borders of redness, stop CDT, and see doctor for oral antibiotic prescription.

If fever is not present then you likely have caught it in the earliest stages and will be able to manage with a conservative plan instead of being admitted to the hospital. Some doctors who are familiar with lymphedema and the risks of cellulitis will prescribe the antibiotic if you call the office and tell them your symptoms. Others will want you to come in before prescribing any medication, which is a good safety practice for them to have.

-Preventing cellulitis is probably the second most common question I get in the clinic. The ultimate defense to limiting or preventing cellulitis occurrence is staying on top of your skin care. A stringent daily regimen that includes washing, applying lotions and doing skin checks will be the best habit you can adopt when you have lymphedema. This detailed routine is often what I recommend to patients who ask for a skin care regimen:

-First and foremost wash daily with an antibacterial soap. There are many options available for a low cost. Safeguard, Dial and Lever all have bar soaps for under 2$. When using bar soap you want to remember to use a fresh and clean wash rag or cleaned loufah each wash. Reusing a rag allows bacteria to set in between washes and then you apply it directly to the skin to increase the risk of contamination. Store the bar on a wire rack or on its own dish. The wire rack is preferred so that it won’t sit in the water that rolls off of it after using it and it eliminates that slimy build up at the bottom of
the bar. If you don’t want to use a bar soap then there are plenty of body wash options available as well. Dial, Curel and Dr. Teal’s are good options.

-After the washing it should go without saying to dry the skin next. Allowing time for skin to dry is important. Obviously using a clean towel to dry is best but there is more than just a quick pat down that can be done. After a quick pat down the skin is still moist and this is the best time to apply the lotion. Which is the next step, but while I am covering drying the skin I am going to talk about skin folds and creases. It is especially important to dry between skin folds and creases. I am not about to act like there are only moderately swollen legs and arm lymphies out there who don’t have skin folds and creases. Two inch skin creases, inner thigh shelf fold, wrist creases, the space between fingers, and many other places are common areas where moisture will hide. Hiding moisture is the number one culprit of infection for lymphies. Pro tip: when you dry the folds use the softest towel or rag that you have to avoid irritating the sensitive skin there---you can also separate the folds to allow air in occasionally to keep it dry and allow some built up moisture evaporate.

-Apply lotion while the skin is still damp but not dripping wet. A pH balancing lotion such as Eucerin, Lubriderm or other related lotions are recommended over scented or highly oily lotions. Vaseline and coconut oils are also not highly recommended. As you are applying the lotion, or if someone applies it for you this is a good time to incorporate the next step of the routine….skin checks.

-Daily skin checks for any cuts, scratches, irritation or abrasions are a good way to stay one step ahead. If you notice a small scratch from bumping your coffee table or a,
irritated indentation from your garment early then it gives you time to act appropriately instead of continuing the same wrap pattern without adding foam to protect that area or you can move the coffee table 2 inches so that you don’t bump it everytime you walk past. An unnoticed cut, scratch, or irritation can lead to a weeping area which can lead to infection and cellulitis.

-This is extra but after washing, drying the skin, applying lotion and doing a skin check I recommend a pump session for those who pump at home, or a self MLD session at home. The time in the pump or doing self MLD allows the lotion to absorb into the skin before putting on your wraps or garments.

-Daily washing or exchange of garments that make direct contact with the skin are necessary. I use the words “direct contact” because the stockinette that should be worn under wraps and garments is the primary layer which hold the dead, dry skin cells from the day before and any bacteria that grew in a damp skin fold or weeping area. Wash garments regularly, especially if visibly soiled. Rotate garments if possible and wear clean stockinette under wraps.

Overview of skin care routine: Wash daily using an antibacterial soap or body wash. Dry skin folds and creases to avoid bacterial growth in moist skin pockets. Use a pH balancing lotion liberally to moisturize skin and to neutralize skin that is prone to infections. Perform daily skin checks for cuts, scratches or deep indentations. Pneumatic pumping, self MLD or an MLD session with therapist is best after skin has been cleaned and moisturized. The final step isn’t actually skin care but it does directly protect your skin--I’m talking about the stockinette that is worn beneath garments and
makes direct contact with the skin. If you perform this routine daily you will limit recurring infections and potentially avoid an initial infection.

- If you have had cellulitis it is common to have more frequent episodes. It may not seem like much advise but daily skin care is the best defence against recurring cellulitis. However, even the most disciplined lymphies still have cellulitis recurrence despite excellent skin care routines. The body is just sensitive to infection due to lymphedema and the initial cellulitis infection. The reason lymphedema increases the risk of cellulitis is the increased interstitial space…all that means is the protein rich fluid has filled up the area just beneath the skin, compared to a healthy lymphatic area where there is not swelling present. I tell people it is like a wreck on a busy metropolitan highway overpass. 5 lanes of traffic suspended above the earth with a 5 car pile up smack dab in the middle. No easy way for the police, ambulance or fire department to get to you because of the traffic congestion and location of wreck. That is your immune system when you have lymphedema. The natural immune response has to fight through the lymph fluid before making contact with the surface area of your skin. Leaving your skin at risk of infection with rapid progression.

Cellulitis is a very real and serious risk for lymphies. It is important that you take every precaution to avoid scratches, cuts and soiled skin. Just like most things related to lymphedema there is a learning curve and you aren’t likely to get it right the first time. If a routine isn’t working for you schedule--make changes without compromising the process. If one soap dries you out too much switch it up or double up the lotion. Things will fall into place with time just don’t give up. You are strong enough and every day you are making progress.
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 cellulitis. 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.