Welcome back for another episode of Lymphedema Podcast. I hope you enjoyed the last episode on cellulitis. All of the episode topics are picked randomly from a list I have created. But I feel like today's topic is conveniently placed early in the new year while we are all still focused on resolutions and creating better habits. Exercise is an essential element in both phases of lymphedema treatment. This quote from “The comprehensive guide for practitioners 3rd edition” really caught my eye while researching for today's podcast: Exercise has profound benefits for weight reduction and management; improving energy, mood and immune functions; combating chronic health conditions and diseases; and providing socialization and relaxation”

All of that sounds wonderful right. But thinking about it and doing it are two different things. Let's talk about those things that are keeping you from starting. If you have already started and still have questions like “should I be doing this” “is there something else I could do”---I’ll cover that to.

First: Precautions and contraindications: also known as yellow or red light for exercise.

Red light for exercise: first and foremost safety. If you are going to be exercising alone, meaning no one at home, and you feel unsure I would recommend waiting until there is someone there with you. Not that you need a babysitter, but often the affected limb causes balance issues that could be worsened with exercise.

-Preexisting medical conditions can affect your safety and or ability to exercise. I am not a doctor so I recommend if you know you have a pre existing medical condition or a doctor has ever told you not to exercise due to a pre existing condition then please do not start an exercise program today. Contact your doctor to discuss you plans and to ensure that you are safe to exercise. Conditions can range from diabetes, kidney disease, heart murmur, seizures, hypertension the list could go on and on.

-Active cellulitis: you do not want to increase blood flow to the infected region of the body to promote spreading the infection. I could count cellulitis as a red light to exercise until fever is gone and redness no longer spreads past documented borders.

-Any contraindication for CDT is also a red light for exercise. This includes: arterial disease, cardiac edema, congestive heart failure, malignant lymphedema, and acute infections.
Yellow light for exercise: Again pre existing medical conditions need to be cleared before starting an exercise program. You safety is priority so be sure you have talked to your doctor about starting an exercise program.

-Active chemo and radiation for cancer treatment: It is my personal belief that staying active by walking and doing range of motion exercises improve quality of life during chemo and radiation. That being said if you are really getting your butt kicked by chemo or your skin is burned and blistered from radiation limit any activity that worsens the symptoms. I will address activities to do if you find yourself in that phase of treatment.

To summarize the red and yellow lights of exercise I will just say talk to your doctor about any pre existing condition that could affect your safety during exercise or that exercise could exacerbate a managed condition. For the most part exercise in moderation is encouraged

Let’s talk about the benefits of exercise. The quote from earlier summarises all the benefits of exercise but I’ll remind you anyway.

1. Weight reduction and management: either by actual fat loss or by lymph loss this is a great benefit for lympies. Managing a healthy weight is important for everyone but especially for those with lymphedema. If you manage your actual weight by daily exercise then you will be aware of increased lymph volume.
2. Improving energy and mood: This one makes me giggle a little. I remember when I was wanting to start a consistent routine of exercising every morning I told a friend “I don’t have the energy to get up that early” followed by the question “how do you have energy the rest of the day?” He laughed and said exercising gave him energy. I also laughed and thought he was just delirious from lack of sleep. Turns out he is right. Exercising produces endorphins that make you feel good and give you energy. It is the craziest thing, I know but once you create the habit of working out you will notice increased energy and energy that is steady. Not that artificial caffeine rush that ends with a crash later in the day.
3. Improving immune function: we already know that our lymphatic systems are part of our immune system. Increased activity of the lymphatic system removes waste and toxins from our bodies leaving us stronger and healthier to fight germs. It goes without saying that increased activity of the lymphatic system removed lymph….the fluid we are trying to push out of the affected areas too.
4. Combating chronic health conditions: exercise strengthens our bodies and enables to function better. Daily exercise can decrease blood pressure, blood sugar, persistent pain, and chronic inflammation. The endorphins pulsing through your body, increased oxygenation of the blood that pumping due to increased heart rate, the removal of toxins and waste from the body and the improved bone and joint strength all work together to heal the body. There is much more science to the effects of exercise but that is a good place to start.
5. Socialization and recreation: Accountability and friendship in exercise was an unexpected benefit for me. Shout out to some of my workout partners past and present: Haley, Mercedez, Kristy, Katelyn, the OT girls from work and others. Working out build friendships. Either you both despite exercise and just workout
to hangout or you are pushing each other toward a new goal...there is a unique bond there. This friendship and accountability can be accomplished from home too. My girl Katelyn is a Beachbody coach who holds conference calls for 6:30 am workouts! There is no excuse, you just have to get out of your own way and take the first step.

I only listed benefits from the quote earlier but there are many more. Taking the first step toward starting an exercise routine is the hardest. Once you have started you have the hardest part out of the way. Keep going, if anything just to prove to yourself that you can!

There is some controversy out there about lymphedema and exercise. When to start? How much? What’s too much? On and on. In the last 10 years there has been a shift in the stance on exercise and lymphedema. Research has shown strong support of exercise following breast cancer treatment with lymphedema. There are is also published research based on leg lymphedema due to cancer treatment that supports exercise. The national lymphedema network revised there position statement in 2011 it reads as “: Follow recommendations on exercise for lymphedema, as specific forms of exercise have been shown to benefit lymphedema. Incorrect or unsafe exercise may exacerbate lymphedema.” Even though the research so far has mostly targeted secondary lymphedema there are general conclusion that we can draw.

- anyone participating in exercise for lymphedema should have their lymphedema under good control. Remedial exercises are considered exercises done under the supervision and guidance of your therapist. Compression should be applied prior to remedial exercise to promote decongestion of the limb. Garments should properly worn and fitted to best results

- anyone wanting to return to a higher level of activity should do so in a transitional way. Starting with remedial exercises during the intensive phase of treatment, followed by increased range of motion and proper form needed for specific activities, leading to developing proper strength, coordination and power is important before jumping back into a high level activity. An example would be playing tennis after treatment for breast cancer. There are specific requirements needed to play tennis at a high level but those can be accomplished safely with time and effort.

- Breathing exercises are an important component in returning the lymph fluid back to the bloodstream. There are two holes in your diaphragm: one is for the inferior vena cava bringing unoxygenated blood from the lower half of your body back to your heart; the other hole is for the thoracic duct which empties the lymph fluid into the venous angle of the heart. The more you practice diaphragm breathing the more you stimulate the removal of lymph from the body. It essentially milks the thoracic duct increasing the removal of fluid from the deep lymphatic system. Walking, biking, and singing promote diaphragm breathing.

- Resistive exercises improve muscle mass, strength of your bones, joints, ligaments and tendons while also promoting weight management. When beginning resistive exercise weights should be low with your focus being on form and repetition. WHOA
said the R world. Repetition. If you have had treatment following breast cancer you have been told avoid overhead activities especially ones that are repetitive. But new studies (2011 and on) have proved that exercise with low weight, high reps while wearing compression improve lymphatic function without causing increased damage. So please do not send me ugly emails before reading and researching current literature. I will warn that before starting weight training you need to be in a stable condition meaning infection free and congested in that limb.

-Aerobic exercise can be as easy as 20 minutes a day walking in your house. It can be done in increments of 5 minutes walking 2 minutes resting. Anything that promotes physical activity and increased heart rate is a great place to start. Other examples are yoga, biking, swimming or water aerobics. High level activities like tennis, golf, kickboxing, and running aren’t recommended for lymphedema patients and are recommended to be avoided. My professional opinion is that you know what you are capable of so start there. If you can only muster up enough strength to walk around you couch 5 times then do it! If you want to join a water aerobics class 5 times a week do it! Just make sure you are not causing harm to your well being or neglecting to wear compression during these activities. If you start to feel that you have hurt, strained or increased volume in your affected limb see your CLT. You may just need a break from the activity and return the basics of compression, MLD and remedial exercise until you feel ready to return to exercise.

Let’s review a few things here. Remedial exercises are often done under the guidance and supervision of your therapist, but you can continue those in your home exercise program before transitioning to more advanced exercise. Resistive exercise is best done after your affected limb has been decongested and infection free for 90 days. Wear compression that is properly fitted during all exercise. Breathing exercises, specifically diaphragm breathing are essential for the return of lymphatic fluid to the bloodstream. Anyone considering increasing their current program or beginning a new program should have their lymphedema under good control first. Aerobic exercise or returning to high-level activities are based on the individual person. You know your body best and if you feel capable of returning to a high level activity to joining a yoga class go for it, just do it in a gradual progression that doesn’t cause you harm.

Now, I want to specifically speak to anyone listening who has head and neck lymphedema. It is likely you saw a speech therapist who gave you funny looking exercises to do...and I bet you’ll never guess what I am about to say...DO THEM! That is right, those silly faces, silly noises and repetitive scrunchy faces are helpful! It is a good practice for you to do facial exercises everyday. Exercise effects people with head and neck lymphedema differently because walking, biking and lifting doesn't affect you the same way. But laying down for most of the day or not doing the facial exercises will lead to negative changes.

I want to close today by telling you what my workout essentials are. Number one will always be music. If I am doing yoga early in the morning it is usually a playlist of Kari Jobe, Lauren Daigle, Phil Whickam. This puts me in a place to praise and reflect while exercising to start my day. If I am doing yoga at night i might play soundscapes or just a chill acoustic playlist from Spotify. I 100% will be listening to upbeat music during cardio
or lifting. Spotify has tons of playlists or genres to choose from. Rachel Hollis is kinda my favorite right now so I keep her Rise weekend 2019 playlist on shuffle during my workouts.

Number 2 is comfortable clothing. Don’t laugh and don’t tell my husband I said this but sometimes this means yoga without my bra on while still wearing my pajamas in the morning. It’s true and now that I have said I can’t take it back. You know my embarrassing yoga secret. But most of the time this means a loose tshirt and some good tennis shoes. They don’t have to be expensive top of the line things to be good for your workout. Wear whatever you can move comfortably in for whatever activity you are doing that day.

Number 3 is community! Find a friend in person or online to share this journey with. It is likely they need it too. You are 100% more likely to stick to a routine or schedule if you have someone counting on you to show up. Zoom is a free video calling app you can use to workout virtually together while miles apart. Set a time to meet someone at the park to walk. Set your alarm to text a friend when you start and stop your workout. Anything to keep you connected to someone making the same effort as you will make you both more successful.

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 exercise. 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.