

The impact of lymphoedema post breast cancer on women's participation in daily occupations

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INTRODUCTION: Occupational therapists are among the few health professionals who assist women with post breast cancer lymphoedema. It is estimated approximately 20% of people worldwide are affected following breast cancer treatment. Such lymphoedema occurs following damage to the lymphatic system following mastectomy, removal of axillary lymph nodes and radiation treatment. Occupational therapy treatment typically includes lymphatic massage, bandaging, pressure garment prescription, and education on managing daily occupations. Despite this important role, very little occupational therapy research exists on this topic. Some research has targeted the management of this chronic condition, women's personal feelings and the detrimental impact lymphoedema has on quality of life. However, to date very little research has adopted an occupational perspective, investigating the impact of upper limb lymphoedema on women's participation in day-to-day life. This is a critical gap in knowledge given that lymphoedema is a life-long condition that requires long-term occupational therapy management to reduce its impact on daily occupations.

OBJECTIVES: This study used an occupational focus to investigate the impact of lymphoedema on daily occupations from the perspective of women with post breast cancer lymphoedema.

METHODS: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 women undergoing occupational therapy treatment for lymphoedema. Interviews focussed on the impact lymphoedema had on their participation in daily occupations. Interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative analysis was undertaken using grounded theory analysis.

RESULTS: The results of this study revealed the critical issues women with upper limb lymphoedema faced in performing their chosen occupations and the unique strategies used to maximise participation. Findings revealed that while lymphoedema impacted upon daily life, women developed creative and proactive strategies to adapt.

CONCLUSION: This study is unique in taking an occupational focus to the investigation of post breast cancer lymphoedema. In doing so, the perspectives of women have revealed common needs and strategies that may assist in the development of future occupational therapy programs.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE PRACTICE OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY: Study findings provide clinicians with an occupation focussed, evidence-based approach to enhancing a woman's participation following a diagnosis of lymphoedema.