
Edema (Swelling)

Edema is caused by the abnormal build-up of fluid in the body. It can be generalized (throughout the body) or localized (specific to one part of the body). Cancer, congestive heart failure, liver, kidney, and thyroid diseases can cause edema. Some medications and eating food with too much salt can make the problem worse.

Signs and symptoms

- Puffiness or swelling of legs, ankles, feet, arms, face, or hands.
- Clothes, shoes, rings, or watches that feel too tight.
- Skin that is shiny, feels tight, indents or dimples when pressed.
- Sudden weight gain.

What can you do for the patient to prevent and treat edema?

- Elevate the affected area when sitting or lying down.
- Remind the patient to avoid crossing legs when sitting, and avoid standing for long periods.
- Teach correct application and care if the patient wears compression stockings (support stockings).
- Encourage limiting intake of salt and sodium.

What should you report to the interdisciplinary team?

- Any new areas of edema, changes in the amount of edema, pain in area with edema.
- Any skin color changes or redness in the area of edema.
- Warmth or temperature changes in the skin.
- Difficulty breathing or a cough.
- Blisters of fluid seeping out of the skin.

How you can support the family

- Inform the family they play an important role in managing edema.
- Reinforce that sometimes edema may not go away.
- Reinforce that the goal is patient comfort and edema may not be painful.
- Teach them how to elevate affected area (for example: use of pillows, recliner, and/or propping feet on a stool).
- Let the family know that if moving the affected area appears to cause pain, tell the interdisciplinary team.

Other HPNA Teaching Sheets on are available at www.HPNA.org.

Reference

Managing Side Effects, Edema or Fluid Retention, <http://www.cancer.net>. Accessed November 21, 2013.

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