

## **Response to August 31, 2011, Associated Press Article on Lymphedema**

*Sonnie Blocki, PT, MS, and Certified Lymphedema Therapist*

The Associated Press (AP) referenced a scientific journal study in their article entitled "Weightlifting in women with breast-cancer related lymphedema." The article was published in the News Tribune, LaSalle, IL, on August 31, 2011. The AP article referenced the New England Journal of Medicine study from August 13, 2009, entitled "Weightlifting in women with breast-cancer related lymphedema", authored by Kathryn H. Schmitz et al<sup>1</sup>.

The AP article promoted weightlifting for breast cancer survivors based upon the well-done study by Schmitz et al.

Possibly, due to a word count limitation, they failed to emphasize the importance of medical monitoring of the affected arm during the exercise program; the guided progression by trained exercise professionals familiar with the protocol; and the education of the patient for the risk management prior to starting an exercise program.

I responded in an "Open Forum" commentary in the News Tribune with the following comments:

*"It was nice to see the AP story in the News Tribune on August 31<sup>st</sup> "Weightlifting helps breast cancer survivors." Research is increasing that supports wellness activities among women going through breast cancer treatment and then afterwards. This specific story supported weightlifting in breast cancer survivors who have the additional complication of lymphedema (swelling of the arm) due to lymph node removal and/or damage of the lymph nodes. Up until the past 5-10 years, the thought was that women who had lymph nodes removed shouldn't lift anything heavy. As a result, their level of activities decreased significantly and many felt that their quality of life decreased. Research shows that physical activity significantly increases quality of life by reducing symptoms associated with cancer treatment specifically cancer fatigue syndrome. Afterwards, physical activity is shown to reduce the risk of reoccurrence, weight gain, and also lymphedema. As a physical therapist, I have had extensive training regarding the management and prevention of lymphedema as well as exercise training for women going through breast cancer. I feel it is important to point out that a woman should talk to her physician about continuing some level of exercise while going through breast cancer treatment. It may not be easy, but the benefits are proven. There are many considerations that you need to work out with your health care providers depending on your treatment protocol. It is important to know if you have a risk of lymphedema by knowing how many lymph nodes were biopsied and if you will need radiation therapy*

*that could affect the lymph system. If you are at risk for lymphedema, know how to prevent it. Exercising and weight lifting afterwards is possible and beneficial, but it needs to be done carefully. If you have already experienced lymphedema or know that you are at risk of lymphedema, exercise and specifically weight training should be done under the direction of a health care professional knowledgeable in lymphedema. “*

A summary of the study appears below:

The purpose of the study was to determine the effects of twice-weekly progressive weightlifting on the arm and hand volume in women with stabilized lymphedema. In the past, it has been thought that women with lymphedema should not lift weights because it could increase their lymphedema.

171 women of diverse ages, ethnicity, and education who are breast cancer survivors were selected to participate in a 12-month study if they had stabilized lymphedema and no recent history of infection. 70 of the 171 women were in the control group.

The control group did not participate in any exercise or activity outside of their normal daily routines. The experimental/exercise group participated in exercise under the supervision of a trainer educated in the protocol as well as lymphedema for 13 weeks, twice a week. After the 13 weeks, the experimental group/exercise group carried out their exercise protocol and advanced them according to the program for the remainder of the year.

The study showed that the women who exercised did not experience any changes in limb volume or bouts with infections that were significantly different from the control group/non-exercise. The exercise group did demonstrate fewer exacerbations (swelling, tightness of clothing, rings etc.) than the control group (14% vs. 29%).

In summary according to this study, a medically supervised progressive weightlifting program can enhance your physical well-being if you are a breast cancer survivor without the previously thought of risk of lymphedema.

References:

<sup>1</sup>Schmitz, KH et al. Weight lifting in women with breast-cancer-related lymphedema. *N Engl J Med.* 2009; 361:(7), 664-73. Available through Medline with Full Text, Ipswich, MA . Accessed on November 19, 2011.