Lymphedema is a distressing consequence of breast cancer treatment affecting the patient in all domains of quality of life. Early identification and diagnosis are key to preventing long-term consequences. The goal of lymphedema management is to slow the progression and provide symptomatic relief to maintain quality of life. Preoperative education, intensive postoperative follow-up, and long-term survivorship care are important to minimize risk factors for developing lymphedema and to provide a mechanism for early detection, treatment, and patient self-care. An interdisciplinary approach, including nutritionists, physical therapists, psychologists, and advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs), is essential to provide a patient-centered approach to the management of lymphedema. APRNs are critical in providing comprehensive assessments, ongoing follow-up care, and patient education in self-care strategies.

The purpose of the current article is to discuss the goals of an interdisciplinary approach to lymphedema management, which includes slowing the progression and providing symptomatic relief to maintain quality of life. Preoperative education, early diagnosis, referral, prompt initiation of treatment to control the disease process, and a surveillance model of care, compared to the current impairment-based rehabilitation model, enable early identification of impairments and prompt intervention.

Oncology nurses need to be aware of potential risk factors for developing lymphedema, identify patients at risk, provide education, and make timely referrals, as appropriate. Early diagnosis and intervention is critical to optimize patient outcomes. Early intervention protocols (e.g., compression garments as initial and long-term management) have been shown to reduce the incidence of lymphedema in high-risk patients, reduce affected limb volume, and prevent progression to more advanced lymphedema for one year postoperatively.

The purpose of the current article is to discuss the goals of an interdisciplinary approach to lymphedema management, which includes slowing the progression of lymphedema, providing symptom relief, preventing medical complications, maintaining skin integrity, reducing infection, maintaining patient compliance with self-management, and maintaining quality of life. Management and treatment should be individualized for each patient.

The full text of this article can be accessed at http://ons.metapress.com.