

Breast cancer patients benefit from decompression chambers used for divers

18 Mar 2005

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Decompression chambers, used to treat deep-sea divers with the bends, may hold the key to relieving painful side effects of breast cancer treatment.

Breathing pure oxygen in a decompression chamber could help women who have been left with lymphoedema - a painful and irreversible condition characterised by a severely swollen arm following radiotherapy.

Scientists funded by Cancer Research UK are now launching a trial to test this new treatment after a pilot study, led by the Royal Marsden Hospital and The Institute of Cancer Research, found it could reduce swelling permanently in many cases.

The treatment, called hyperbaric oxygen therapy (HBO), will be available in Hull, Plymouth, Gosport and Leytonstone.

Leading the trial is Professor Yarnold, Professor of Clinical Oncology at the Institute of Cancer Research and Consultant at the Royal Marsden.

Prof Yarnold says: "Radiotherapy following breast cancer surgery can damage the lymphatic system, meaning that fluid fails to drain properly and builds up in the arm causing swelling.

"Some women might have slight swelling that doesn't cause much of a problem. Others can suffer serious swelling, pain and discomfort. We hope to show that HBO treatment can succeed in reducing this swelling."

Two thirds of volunteers recruited to the trial will receive 90 minutes of HBO therapy, five days a week for six weeks. They will wear a large transparent dome over the head that supplies pure oxygen through tubes. They can read or talk normally at all times. The remaining third of volunteers will receive standard care for lymphoedema including bandaging, exercise and massage.

Barbara Pearce, age 62 from London, took part in the pilot study and says it changed her life.

"I had breast cancer 25 years ago and had surgery and radiotherapy. I felt so angry when later I developed lymphoedema - one arm weighed a stone more than the other one. It was both distressing and disabling.

"The hyperbaric oxygen therapy was a life-changing experience. My 'swollen' arm is now about a third the size it was, I can wear fitted jackets and sleeveless dresses for the first time in 20 years. It has raised my self-esteem and I have entered my 60s feeling more confident than I have felt for a long time. The treatment took nearly two hours a day for six weeks but it was worth every minute. I could chat and read and didn't feel at all claustrophobic."

Professor Robert Souhami, Director of Policy and Communication at Cancer Research UK, which is funding the study says, "Current therapies for lymphoedema aim to control the symptoms rather than treating the cause. There are encouraging signs that hyperbaric oxygen therapy might be an effective treatment and this trial will provide stronger evidence."

Women wishing to check if they are eligible for the study should contact Mrs Lone Gothard, Research Coordinator on 020 8661 3460 or visit the cancer trials database on Cancer Research UK's patient information website at www.cancerhelp.org.uk.

--- This study is looking to recruit 63 volunteers to take part from April 2005

--- Volunteers should live within easy reach of one of the 5 participating centres

- Royal Marsden Hospital, Sutton, Surrey
- Hyperbaric Unit, BUPA hospital Hull & East Riding, Anlaby, Hull
- Diving Diseases Research Centre, Plymouth
- Hyperbaric Medicine Unit, Royal Hospital Haslar, Gosport
- London Hyperbaric, Whipps Cross University Hospital, Leytonstone

--- Women may be eligible if they have had surgery for breast cancer had radiotherapy to the breast and arm pit at least 2 years ago have no signs of cancer now

--- The trial is funded jointly by Cancer Research UK and the Department of Health

--- For enquiries about the trial, please contact Lucy Twitchin or Susan Massey at the Royal Marsden Hospital on 020 7808 2383/2605.

SOURCE: [Cancer Research UK](#)

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