

Examining body image and illness representations among persons with lymphedema - observational study

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Abstract

Purpose: Lymphedema is a serious illness with dire consequences, which include functional dysfunction, unattractive physical appearance, and negative psychological effects. How people cope with these consequences might be associated with the way they perceive their disease (i.e., illness representations), as well as with their own body image.

The main aims were: 1. To describe body image perceptions and the cognitive and emotional illness representations of adults with lymphedema with various backgrounds, 2. To examine the associations between body image perceptions and background variables in adults with lymphedema, and 3. To examine the relationship between body image and illness representations in adults with lymphedema. The study is unique as it examines adults with lymphedema resulting from various causes and not necessarily cancer.

Methods: A cross-sectional study with 201 participants was conducted among a convenience sample of Hebrew speaking adults (older than 50 years) with lymphedema. Face-to-face interviews were conducted using structured questionnaires that included questions about illness representations (IPQ-R) and body image (BIRS).

Results: Participants' assessment of their body image was moderately negative, and they perceived their illness as a long term (68%) and concerning condition (58%). Statistically significant positive correlations were found between negative illness representations and negative body image. A multiple regression analysis revealed that perceptions related to identification of the disease, its consequences, and its emotional representations explained 55% of the variance in body image.

Conclusions: Body image perceptions of persons with lymphedema is linked to their illness perception. The study shows that healthcare staff's attention to body image perceptions and illness representations during treatment is very important for their ability to encourage persons with lymphedema to deal better with their disease and its treatment.

Keywords: Lymphedema, body image, illness representations