

## What is lymphedema?

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Lymphedema (lymph = a colourless fluid; edema = swelling) is swelling in an area of your body that can occur if parts of your lymph system are not working properly. The main work of the lymphatic system is to protect you from infections. The lymphatic system moves lymph fluid throughout your body. Lymphedema occurs most often in your arms or legs.

## Who is at risk for lymphedema?

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Patients who have lymph nodes removed during surgery, or who are having radiation treatments (or both) can be at risk for lymphedema. If the lymph nodes are blocked or removed, there may be too much lymph fluid for your body to handle. This slow movement of lymph may cause swelling in your tissues. Lymphedema can occur immediately after surgery or treatment but it also can occur several years later.

## How do I know if I have lymphedema?

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**If you have lymphedema you may:**

- Notice that your limb is bigger.
- Feel a heaviness or a full feeling in your arm or leg.
- Feel your skin is aching or too tight.
- Find the skin over the swelling feels hard.
- Find you have trouble bending your wrist or ankle.
- Find your clothing, rings or watch feel too tight.
- Notice swelling in your fingers or toes.
- Feel “pins and needles” in your fingers or toes.

**Let your doctor know if you find you are experiencing any of the above.**

## How is lymphedema managed?

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You or your doctor may be the first to discover your lymphedema. You may be given simple exercises and be encouraged to be more physically active. Exercise such as swimming and walking are often recommended. While there is no cure for lymphedema, there are effective ways to help manage the swelling. If needed you may be referred to a specially trained therapist who may:

- Measure you for a compression (pressure) garment
- Show you some exercises to help with your lymphedema
- Perform a lymphatic drainage massage
- Use a special inflatable pump to help reduce the swelling

**All of these techniques can help to keep the swelling down.**

## How can I help relieve lymphedema or prevent further complications?

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**There are many things you can do to manage your lymphedema and prevent complications. They are:**

- Do the simple daily exercise or self-massage that you have learned.
- Wear properly fitted pressure wraps or sleeves.
- Eat healthy meals, low in salt.
- Maintain an ideal weight.
- Do not wear tight-fitting clothing and jewellery.
- Keep swollen arm or leg elevated as much as possible.
- Protect swollen areas from extreme heat (including saunas) and cold.
- Protect your skin from the sun, insect and pet bites.
- Use only an electric razor.
- Use extra care not to damage your cuticles when cutting and filing your nails.
- You may want to talk with your doctor before taking a plane ride to discuss the possible benefits of wearing a compression garment for the flight.
- Take extra care with minor cuts and burns, and if more serious, see your doctor.
- Whenever possible, do not allow injections, blood pressure readings, an intravenous to be started, or blood taken from your affected arm or leg.

- Wear gloves when using chemical cleaners and when gardening.
- Do not lift or carry heavy items, especially purses with shoulder straps.
- Use a thimble when sewing.

**Call your doctor immediately if you notice any signs of infection such as:**

- redness or heat in a swollen part of your body.

## Questions to ask your health care team

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- Am I likely to develop lymphedema?
- Were lymph nodes removed in my surgery?
- Are there lymph nodes in the area of my radiation treatment?
- What exercises can I do to reduce lymphedema?
- Who can teach me simple exercises to help reduce the symptoms of lymphedema?
- Do I need a referral to see a lymphedema therapist?
- Are there any medications or natural treatments to help reduce symptoms?
- Will the symptoms of lymphedema go away without treatment?

