

Managing Lymphedema (swelling) in Your Arm or Leg

What is lymphedema?

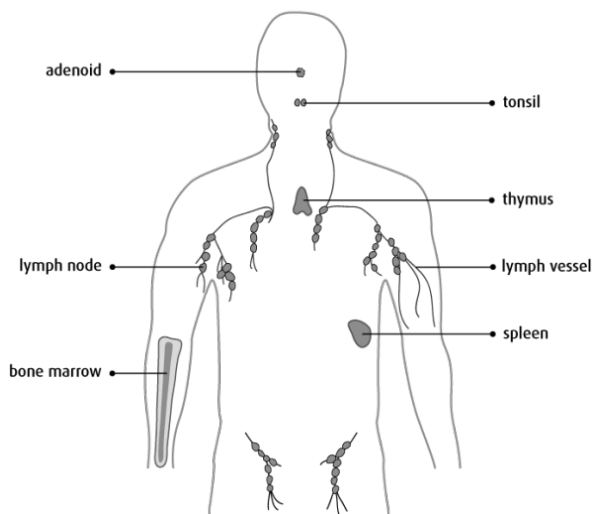
Lymphedema (lim-fuh-dee-muh) is a build-up of lymph fluid in your tissues. This build-up causes swelling (“edema”) in your arm or leg.

What causes lymphedema?

Your lymphatic system helps fluid flow through your body tissues. The lymphatic system carries fluid back to the bloodstream, through a network of channels and lymph nodes.

The lymph nodes filter lymph fluid and help fight infections. If your lymph nodes are damaged or removed, lymph fluid can build up and cause lymphedema.

The Lymphatic System



Your lymph nodes can be damaged by:

- Cancer and cancer treatments.
- Surgery (lymph nodes may be removed).
- Inflammation (your body’s immune system response).
- Infection.

Breast cancer treatment is the most common cause of lymphedema. Most people with breast cancer do not get lymphedema.

Lymphoma, melanoma, uterine, prostate, vulvar or ovarian cancers and treatments are also associated with lymphedema.

Your chance of getting lymphedema will also go up if you have:

- More than one treatment in the same area (for example, surgery and radiation).
- Extra body weight.
- Repeated infections in the same arm or leg.

Signs of lymphedema

- Your sleeve, wristwatch, rings or socks leave marks in your skin.
- Your arm, leg or pelvis feels full, puffy or heavy.
- You have swelling in your arm or leg, including your fingers or toes.
- It is hard to move the joints in your arms or legs.
- Your skin is tight, warm, shiny, and thick or the texture has changed.

Lymphedema usually starts in your underarm, neck, pelvis or groin (the area where your upper leg meets your pelvis). Lymph fluid can then build up in your chest, pelvis, arm or leg.

Lymphedema does not spread to other parts of the body. It will only be in areas of your body where you have damaged lymph nodes. If you have damaged lymph nodes, you will always have a risk of getting lymphedema.

Can lymphedema be cured?

We cannot cure lymphedema, but it can be managed. By getting treatment early, you will increase the likelihood of successful treatment. Do not wait to start treatment.

What can I do for myself?

Talk to your health care team if you notice any signs of lymphedema or if your lymphedema gets worse despite treatment. Lymphedema is easiest to treat when it is mild.

Your health care team will give you instructions on how to care for your arm or leg. It is very important you follow these instructions.

By managing your lymphedema, you can:

- Reduce swelling.
- Improve movement.
- Lessen pain.
- Prevent infection.
- Stop your lymphedema from getting worse.

How to manage your lymphedema

Take very good care of your skin to:

- Prevent infections.
- Keep your skin healthy.

For the arm or leg that has lymphedema, or is at risk for lymphedema:

- Try not to get needles (injections or shots) or blood pressure measurements, especially if there is swelling.
- Treat cuts or burns quickly. Keep the area clean, use an antiseptic ointment (for example Polysporin) and cover with a bandage.
- If you notice redness, warmth and pain in your skin, you may be getting an infection. Talk to your health care team right away.
- Keep your skin clean and moisturized
- In the sun, wear sunscreen and long sleeves or pants
- Wear loose fitting jewelry and clothing without tight cuffs or waistbands
- Do not carry a heavy bag on the arm with lymphedema
- Do not use extreme heat or cold, such as ice packs and hot packs. Check with your health care team before using saunas, steam baths and hot tubs.
- Wear gloves when gardening or cooking so you do not get cuts or bug bites
- Do not wax. Use an electric shaver. This is unlikely to cut your skin. If you have to use a razor, use clean, sharp blades with soap or shaving cream.

Get a Compression Garment

These are sleeves, stockings or gauntlets (gloves). They are made of elasticized fabric that put pressure on your arm or leg. This pressure helps drain lymph fluid and stop it from building up.

You usually need to wear these garments all day.

To get a compression garment, a certified fitter needs to measure you.

You can find fitters at medical supply shops or pharmacies.

Check the B.C. Lymphedema Association website for a list of shops or ask your health care team (www.bclymph.org).

If you have lymphedema from breast cancer treatment, Pharmacare may pay for two compression garments each year for each arm that has lymphedema. To get coverage you must have had:

- A mastectomy (removal of one or both of your breasts)

OR

- A lumpectomy (removal of a part of your breast).

Pharmacare does not cover compression garments for lymphedema that is caused from anything other than breast cancer treatment.

Try to Exercise Regularly

Exercising has many benefits:

- Increases muscle tone.
- May help move lymph fluid out of your arm or leg and reduce swelling.
- Helps keep a healthy body weight.

Exercise tips

- Talk to your health care team before starting an exercise.
- Pick exercise you enjoy.
- When you rest after exercise, raise your swollen arm or leg to help drain the excess fluid.

See a Certified Lymphedema Therapist

- Specially trained Physiotherapists and Massage Therapists who can help you manage lymphedema.

- They use compression bandages, a type of massage called manual lymphatic drainage, exercise, and skin care.
- You can get a list of certified therapists from the B.C. Lymphedema Association website (www.bclymph.org).
- Your health insurance may cover the cost.

Talk to a counsellor or go to a support group

Lymphedema can be very hard to deal with. B.C. Lymphedema Association (www.bclymph.org) has support groups.

- You can find online support through the Canadian Cancer Society at www.cancerconnection.ca
- Call your local BC Cancer Patient & Family Counselling program if you want to talk to a counsellor.

Where can I learn more?

- BC Cancer Library Lymphedema pathfinder: bccancer.libguides.com/pathfinder-lymphedema
- Find a trained Physiotherapist: bcphysio.org/find-a-physio
Advanced search > Areas of Practice:
Lymphedema, Breast Health, Women's Health.
- BC Cancer Supportive Care Services: www.bccancer.bc.ca/supportivecare

