

LYMPHEDEMA: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ)

What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is swelling caused by a buildup of fluid that usually occurs in the arms or legs. **Primary** lymphedema is a rare genetic condition. **Secondary** lymphedema (this type will be discussed below) usually occurs when lymph vessels or lymph nodes are blocked, damaged, or removed.

What is the lymphatic system?

The lymphatic system is a vast network of tubes (vessels) and grapelike clusters called lymph nodes. The vessels transport colorless fluid called lymph and cells of the immune system (lymphocytes) throughout the body. The lymphatic system serves many purposes including: filtration, transport of fluid and initiation of immune responses. The lymphatic system is responsible for absorbing and filtering fluid surrounding the cells and tissues of the body

What are lymph nodes?

Lymph nodes are small sac-like structures located along the lymph vessels. They are home to lymphocytes, a type of white blood cell. Lymph nodes store lymphocytes and help control the immune response by allowing lymphocytes to come into contact with foreign materials (antigens) in a manner that stimulates their activity.

What causes lymphedema?

Lymphedema usually develops when lymph nodes or vessels are blocked, damaged, or removed. The most common cause of lymphedema is cancer treatment; either surgery, radiation, or a combination of the two. After a diagnosis of breast cancer physicians remove lymph nodes to detect and/or prevent the spread of cancer. If cancer is detected in the nodes, radiation therapy will be directed at the nodes.

Who is at risk for lymphedema?

Anyone who has had lymph nodes removed or radiation treatment targeted at the lymph nodes is at some risk. It is unclear what percentage of people treated will develop lymphedema, so it is best to watch for any signs of lymphedema (below) in the affected limb.

What are the symptoms of lymphedema?

Some of the signs and symptoms of lymphedema are swelling, decreased mobility, skin tightness, limb feels heavy, tight clothing, jewelry, and numbness.

How do I know if I will get lymphedema or not?

Currently, there is no way to determine who will develop lymphedema or when it will occur. But, more treatment generally provides a greater risk. A combination of lymph node removal and nodal radiation is thought to increase the risk of developing lymphedema. Lymphedema can develop hours or years after cancer treatment.

Is there a cure for lymphedema?

There is currently no cure for lymphedema. But with the help of a lymphedema specialist it can be managed. Often a compression sleeve is used to prevent the condition from worsening. See next question for more information about treatment.

How is lymphedema treated?

The goal of lymphedema treatment is to reduce swelling and minimize discomfort. Treatment often involves skin care, massage, bandaging, and exercise. These are often used in combination by a lymphedema care specialist.

What should I avoid to prevent lymphedema from occurring?

If you are considered at risk for developing lymphedema, there are some things to keep in mind.

1. Use care to avoid injury to the affected arm
2. Use gloves for household chores
3. Avoid heat, no hot baths, hot tubs, saunas
4. Avoid sunburns
5. Avoid tight accessories
6. No blood pressure taken on affected arm
7. No blood drawn from affected arm
8. Avoid gaining excessive weight
9. No lifting heavy objects (>10-15 lbs)

Can lymphedema get worse?

Lymphedema can get worse and cause serious complications to the affected limb. Therefore, it is important to manage your lymphedema should it develop. To prevent lymphedema from getting worse, you should follow the same guidelines aimed at preventing the development of lymphedema (above).