

What is lymphedema?

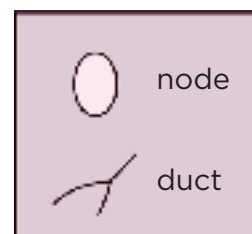
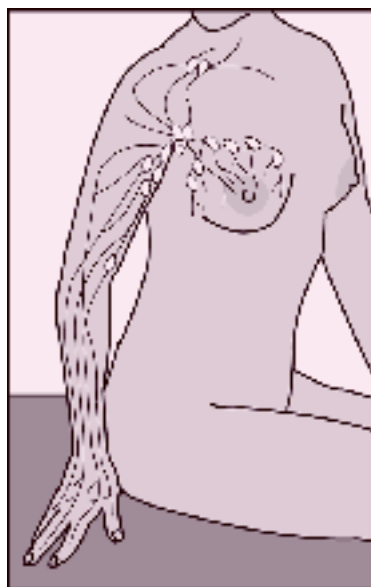
Lymphedema [lim-fa-DEE-ma] is a build-up of lymphatic fluid. It causes swelling in the arm and hand, and sometimes in the chest/breast/back on the side of surgery. When the lymphatic system is damaged, fluid collects in the tissue of the affected area causing swelling. The surgical removal of the lymph nodes in the underarm area and/or radiation therapy to the affected area can interfere with normal lymph drainage and cause lymphedema.

What to look for

Here are some signs of lymphedema. Let your doctor know if you experience any of these symptoms:

- a heavy feeling in your arm
- a tight sensation in your arm or hand
- swelling in your arm or hand
- decreased flexibility in your hand or wrist
- shirt sleeves or jewelry that feel tight
- skin that may “pit” with any finger pressure

Call your doctor if your affected arm or hand is warm, red, swollen or if you have a fever. These symptoms could indicate an infection and may require antibiotics.



Lymph fluid drains through ducts. The fluid travels from your hand, up your arm and to your axillary nodes.

The lymph system consists of ducts (vessels), nodes and tissue. Its role is to filter the lymph fluid for foreign substances or organisms and to produce cells that are vital in fighting infections. Colorless fluid (lymph) moves along in ducts and passes through the nodes, where fluid is filtered.

Who is at risk?

Any woman who has had some of her axillary lymph nodes removed or has undergone radiation therapy to this area is at risk for lymphedema. It can occur weeks after surgery, within a few months, after a couple of years or even years after treatment. As long as precautions are taken, lymphedema can be avoided by most women.

Reducing your risk

Here are some good ways to reduce your risk of developing lymphedema:

1. Have injections or blood drawn from the unaffected arm.
2. Have your blood pressure taken from the unaffected arm.
3. Wear gloves when doing house or yard work.
4. Keep your arm clean and dry. Moisturize your skin after bathing.
5. Protect your skin from the sun with sunscreen (at least SPF 15) and protective clothing.
6. Avoid lifting or carrying heavy bags, purses or other objects with your at-risk arm.
7. Avoid wearing tight jewelry or clothing.
8. Avoid cutting your cuticles during manicures.
9. Use an electric razor, not a blade, to shave your underarm.
10. Use insect repellent when outdoors, but wash it off when inside.
11. Avoid any type of injury, including scratches and bruises, to the at-risk arm.
12. When flying in an airplane, wear a compression sleeve and drink lots of fluids during the flight.
13. Rest your arm in an elevated position (above your heart or shoulder).

Treatments for lymphedema

Lymphedema can be kept under control with a variety of treatments. Tell your doctor about any changes in your arm as soon as you notice them. Check with your insurance company to see if your treatment choice is covered.

Arm elevation — Keeping your hand and arm higher than your heart and shoulder can help increase the flow of lymphatic fluid.

Compression sleeve — This device is an elastic, custom-fitted sleeve that applies pressure to help fluid drain. It can be used alone or with manual lymphatic drainage.

Manual lymphatic drainage — This procedure consists of a gentle arm massage to stimulate movement of lymphatic fluid. Wrapping the arm and hand is also included to reduce the swelling. It is done by a trained, certified physical therapist.

Mild exercise — Staying physically active will also increase the flow of lymph fluid. Arm stretches will help you maintain range of motion. Activities like swimming and walking will help with circulation.

Avoid strenuous and repetitive exercises. Check with your doctor or physical therapist about which exercises are right for you.

Weight loss — Maintaining a healthy weight can also help reduce lymphedema.

Resources

Organizations

National Lymphedema Network
1-800-541-3259
www.lymphnet.org

The National Cancer Institute
1-800-4 CANCER
www.cancer.gov

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Axillary Lymph Nodes
- Breast Surgery
- Breast Health Resources