

Lymphedema for the Cancer Survivor

Lymphedema is swelling that can happen after cancer treatment, especially if lymph nodes were removed or treated with radiation. It is a long-term condition, but there are ways to manage it and improve quality of life.

What is lymphedema?

The body has a network of vessels called the "lymphatic system" that removes a clear fluid called "lymph" from the tissues. The lymph nodes are part of this system. The lymphatic system is like the system of blood vessels. But instead of blood, the lymphatic system carries lymph, which also contains infection-fighting cells.

Lymphedema happens when lymph fluid builds up in part of the body, usually an arm or leg, causing swelling. This can make the area feel heavy, tight, or uncomfortable. It can also increase the risk of infections.

What are the symptoms of lymphedema?

The most common symptoms are:

- Swelling in a limb (arm or leg)
- Aching pain
- Tight or heavy feeling in the affected limb
- Trouble moving the affected limb

If lymphedema happens after cancer treatment, symptoms might not start until weeks, months, or even years later.

Is there a test for lymphedema?

Yes, but it is usually not needed. Measuring limb circumference (the length around the affected limb) is part of the exam to estimate how much fluid has built up in the limb and can be used to assess improvement with treatment.

Sometimes, imaging tests to look at your lymphatic vessels is recommended such as ultrasounds or CT scans.

How is lymphedema treated?

There is no cure. But there are treatments that can help reduce the swelling and make you more comfortable. These work best if you start them before the swelling has gotten too bad, so see your care team as soon as you notice any swelling.

Treatments can include:

- Exercise: Gentle movement, resistance training, water-based exercise, and yoga can help control swelling and improve strength. Exercise does not make lymphedema worse and may help symptoms.

Always check with your therapist before starting new activities. During exercise, you should always wear a compression bandage or garment.

- Compression bandaging: This is a special kind of bandaging that your doctor or nurse can put on. It puts gentle, steady pressure on the swollen area. This helps keep the swelling down.
- Compression garments: These are special sleeves or stockings that you wear. They work a lot like compression bandaging. They put gentle, steady pressure on the affected limb to keep swelling down.
- Manual lymphatic drainage: The main treatment is called **complete decongestive therapy (CDT)**. This has two phases:
 - **Intensive therapy:** A certified lymphedema therapist will help reduce swelling using special massage (manual lymphatic drainage), compression bandages or garments, gentle exercises, and careful skin and nail care. This phase usually lasts a few weeks.
 - **Self-care:** After swelling is reduced, you will continue care at home. This includes wearing compression garments, doing exercises, taking care of your skin, and sometimes using a compression pump. Your therapist will teach you how to do these steps safely
- Surgery – If you have severe lymphedema, your doctor might suggest surgery. Procedures called "lymph bypass" and "lymph node transfer" can improve the flow of lymph. Sometimes, surgeons remove the extra tissue to make the limb smaller.
- Emotional support – Having lymphedema might make you feel sad or anxious. If you are struggling to cope, tell your care team so they can help you get support.

What can I do on my own?

It is very important to avoid injury or infections of your affected limb. There are also other things you can do that might help reduce the swelling.

To avoid injury:

- Keep your skin clean. Wash with a mild soap every day.
- Be careful with your nails. Don't pick at the skin around your nails or cut your cuticles.
- Use lotion to keep your skin from getting dry and cracked.
- Use an electric razor instead of a razor blade to shave.
- Always use sunscreen when you go outside.
- If your arm is affected, wear gloves when gardening, cooking, or doing other things that could hurt your skin.
- If your leg is affected, wear hard-soled shoes when outside.
- If you do get a small cut, scrape, or bite on your arm, hand, leg, or foot, clean it well with soap and water. Then, use an antibiotic ointment. Call your doctor or nurse if it does not heal quickly or if you have signs of an infection.
- When possible, avoid shots, blood draws, or IV lines in the limb with lymphedema. Avoid other procedures that puncture the skin, like acupuncture or tattooing.
- If you have lymphedema in an arm, avoid routinely having your blood pressure taken on that side.
- Avoid saunas, steam baths, and hot tubs.

To help reduce the swelling:

- Wear loose-fitting clothes and jewelry, unless it is a special garment or bandage your doctor or nurse gives you.
- Try to keep a healthy body weight.
- Do not let your arm hang at your side for long periods of time without moving it. If your leg is affected, avoid standing for long periods of time.
- Keep your limb raised on pillows when you are sitting or lying down.

When Should You Call Your Healthcare Team?

If you experience any of the following symptoms, call your healthcare team:

- You have increased swelling.
- You have redness (red patches or streaks) or a rash.
- The affected limb feels warm to the touch.
- You have a temperature higher than 100.4°F (38°C) that is not from a cold or other illness.