



Pay attention to your body

Know and watch for the early warning signs of lymphedema. They are as simple as:

- A feeling of heaviness
- Your ring or watch becomes too tight

These are all early warning signs to call your doctor or therapist immediately.

Although there is no cure for lymphedema, being treated early is better and can help your health and lifestyle.

Simple exercises to prevent lymphedema: Ask your doctor or therapist about these and other exercises you can do to help prevent lymphedema after breast cancer surgery.

The first days after surgery: These gentle exercises will help lymph fluid flow. Repeat each exercise as you feel comfortable.

Lie down and put a pillow under your arm and gently squeeze a ball or squeeze your fist.



Clasp your hands together or hold the ends of a short stick and gently raise your arms as high as is comfortable.

Use deep breathing exercises to help increase the lymph flow



When You Get Home:

Do these exercises regularly to improve lymph drainage in the arm.

Pendulum Exercise: Stand with your feet apart and bend forward. Rest your unaffected arm on a table or back of a chair. Let your affected arm hang down loosely and gently swing your arm from side to side, back and front. Then make small circles, slowly getting bigger as your arm relaxes.



Wall climbing: Stand 6 to 8 inches away from the wall. Starting from shoulder level, slowly walk your fingers higher up the wall. Repeat. Mark the how high you reach each day. If it is hard to reach the mark you made the day before. Don't worry, just try again later.



Hand Squeezing Exercise: Put a small rubber ball in the palm of your hand. Squeeze gently then relax.

Forward Head Roll: Bring your chin forward toward your chest. Slowly turn your chin from side to side.

Talk to your doctor before starting any exercise program. **DO NOT FORCE YOURSELF DOING ANY EXERCISE.** Tell your doctor or therapist immediately if any swelling occurs.

Lymphedema



What Breast Cancer Patients Need to Know

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What is Lymphedema?

(Pronounced: lim-fa-deem-a)

Lymphedema is the unusual or abnormal swelling of a body part. The swelling is caused by lymphatic fluid building up in body tissue.

This swelling happens when the lymphatic system is damaged. Lymphedema can happen when nodes and lymphatic vessels are damaged from surgery or radiation. Lymphedema can be treated, but not cured. It can be a serious problem if it is not treated. Lymphedema can be controlled with the right treatment and care.



Lymphedema present in arm on the right

How Often does Lymphedema Occur?

One in five women with breast cancer will have mild to severe lymphedema during their life. Most lymphedema happens in the first three years after surgery with Axillary Node Dissection. Patients who are treated with both radiation and chemotherapy are three times more likely to have lymphedema than those who only have chemotherapy.

Are You At Risk?

If you have had breast cancer treatment that included surgery to take out lymph nodes, radiation or chemotherapy, you have a higher risk of getting lymphedema. The following can increase your risk even more:

- Do you have scars from injuries, burns, surgery, or radiation?
- Is there a history of swollen feet or legs in your family?
- Is it hard to move your shoulder, arm, or hand in any way?
- Is there a history of heart or circulatory problems in your family?
- Have you had previous surgeries under the arm?
- Are you overweight?
- Do you have diabetes?
- Are you a smoker?

What are the most common causes of Lymphedema?

Lymphedema can occur when the nodes and lymphatic vessels are damaged or taken out during surgery. It can also be caused by:

- radiation used during cancer treatment
- trauma or injury
- infection
- malignant tumours
- immobility

When lymphatic tissues or lymph nodes have been damaged or removed, lymph fluid cannot drain normally from that area. The area can become swollen and heavy with fluid. Lymphedema can occur many years after treatment.

Can Lymphedema be prevented?

Lymphedema cannot be completely prevented. If symptoms are found and treated early, it can be controlled and managed. The only risks that can be controlled are infection and injuries to the arm.

If you have questions or concerns about your surgery and lymphedema, discuss your options with your surgeon.

What are the Early Warning Signs of Lymphedema?

Lymphedema can happen right after surgery or radiation therapy. It can also happen years later, without warning. The symptoms of lymphedema usually appear in the arm nearest the surgery or radiation site. These symptoms include:

- **Swelling/puffiness** of the arm or trunk on the same side as the surgery. It may happen gradually or suddenly.
- **The arm gets larger.** This may happen gradually or suddenly.
- **Tightness** of the skin and a feeling of heaviness in the area.
- **Discomfort** or a “pins and needles” feeling in area.
- **Indenting** of the skin when swollen area is pressed.
- **Aching or heavy** feeling of the limb
- **Redness** or other signs of an infection in the area.
- **Feeling of warmth** of the arm or body part with no redness
- **Bursting or shooting pain** that happens off and on in the affected area.