

Lymphedema



PMH

A possible effect of breast cancer treatment -- are you at risk?

What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is a persistent swelling that can happen in areas of the body where lymph nodes were treated or removed. Breast cancer patients who have had surgery and radiation treatment are at risk of getting this condition. Although lymphedema usually develops within a year or two after breast cancer treatment, some patients may notice swelling many years after.

How will I know if I am at risk for lymphedema?

Chances of getting lymphedema will depend on:

- The extent of your surgical treatment
- The number of lymph nodes you have had removed
- The extent of radiation therapy
- Your weight

Why does lymphedema develop?

Your lymphatic system drains fluid and some waste materials from your tissues. When your lymphatic system is damaged as a result of removal and radiation of lymph nodes, it may not drain lymph fluid properly from areas of your body close to the affected lymph nodes. This may cause a swelling in the damaged or affected part of your body.

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How can I reduce my chances of getting lymphedema?

While there is no clear scientific proof that lymphedema can be prevented, there are some things you can do that may lower your chance of getting it.

1. Look after your skin.

The most important thing you can do is avoid breaks in your skin that could lead to an infection (like cuts, pinpricks, animal scratches).

- Keep your skin clean and dry.
- Apply a moisturizing lotion daily to prevent chapping.
- Do not cut your cuticles. If you have manicures, make sure the person knows not to cut your cuticles.
- Protect exposed skin with sunscreen and insect repellent, and try to wear long sleeves when you are outside.
- Be careful with razors to avoid nicks and skin irritation.
- If possible, avoid getting injections in the arm on the affected side of your body.
- Wear gloves and long sleeves when doing any activity that may cause a burn or injury (like baking, washing dishes, gardening or using tools).

Care for any injury. If you do get cuts, scrapes, torn cuticles, hang nails, insect bites or burns on the affected area of your body: wash the area with soap and warm water, apply antibiotic ointment or cream (like Polysporin® or a similar drug store brand), and cover with an adhesive (sticky) bandage or apply a liquid bandage.

Look for early signs of infection. The area may be infected if it is: red, swollen, warm or hot to the touch, tender or painful. Call your doctor right away if the infected area is getting larger. If your doctor is not available, go to your nearest walk-in clinic or hospital emergency department.

2. Avoid constricting (binding or squeezing) your arm.

Keeping the circulation flowing in your arm will help you avoid a backup of fluid that can overload your lymphatic system.

- Avoid tight fitting jewelry and tight or restrictive clothing on your arm.
- If you wear a bra, wear one that fits well with wide straps and preferably without under wires.
- Avoid carrying heavy purses or bags with shoulder straps on your affected side.
- If possible, avoid having your blood pressure taken on your affected side.

3. Avoid extreme temperatures.

Avoid directly exposing yourself to very cold or hot temperatures for a long period of time on the affected side of your body. For example: wear a coat and gloves in very cold weather; avoid hot tubs and saunas.

4. Keep a healthy body weight.

If you are overweight, you have a greater chance of getting lymphedema. Ask your family doctor or a dietitian what your healthy body weight should be and ask them for help to achieve it. A healthy diet and regular exercise program (like walking) should help.

5. Activity and lifestyle.

Most people who are at risk of lymphedema can safely perform aerobic and resistance exercises if they follow these tips:

1. Gradually build up the length of time and intensity of your exercise.
2. Don't expect that you will return to your pretreatment exercise level right away.
3. Look at the affected area during and after activity and watch for any change in size, shape, texture, soreness, heaviness or firmness.

Always check with your doctor before starting any new kind of exercise.

6. Compression Garments.

Consider wearing well fitted compression garments when doing intense and repetitive exercises and for air travel. *However keep in mind that benefits of wearing compression garments have not been fully researched.*

Please note that since there is still more about lymphedema that needs to be researched and tested, these suggestions are based on what is currently known about it and on years of clinical experience.

What warning signs should I watch for?

Your best defense against lymphedema is to catch it early. Look for:

- A feeling of tightness in the skin of your arm, hand/fingers, breast, back or chest.
- A feeling of heaviness in your arm or breast.
- Swelling/increase in the size of your arm, hand/fingers, breast, back or chest.
- Clothing or jewelry that feels tight on the affected side.
- Aching or stiffness in the arm on the affected side.
- Any swelling or discomfort that does not go away within 6 – 12 weeks after surgery.

If you notice any of these symptoms tell your doctor.

Where can I go for help or more information on lymphedema?

For more information come to the **PMH Lymphedema Awareness Class** (check the monthly Patient & Survivorship Education Calendar of Events for the dates and locations). You can also contact the Lymphedema Association of Ontario for resources and information online at <http://www.lymphontario.ca/> or by phone 416-410-2250 or 1-877-723-0033. Check the National Lymphedema Network website <http://www.lymphnet.org/> for their position statements on Risk Reduction and Air Travel.

If your doctor diagnoses you with Lymphedema, ask for a referral to the **Princess Margaret Hospital Lymphedema Clinic** to assess your condition and to learn how to manage it.