

What is Lymphedema?

For breast cancer patients and their families wanting to understand lymphedema

Read this booklet to learn:

- What lymphedema is
- The risk factors for lymphedema
- Answers to frequently asked questions
- Where to get more information



Patient Education



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What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is a swelling of a body part caused by a build up of protein-rich fluid, called **lymph**, in the tissue spaces. The build up of fluid happens when your lymphatic system has been weakened because of your cancer treatment, and it is not able to drain the fluid well.

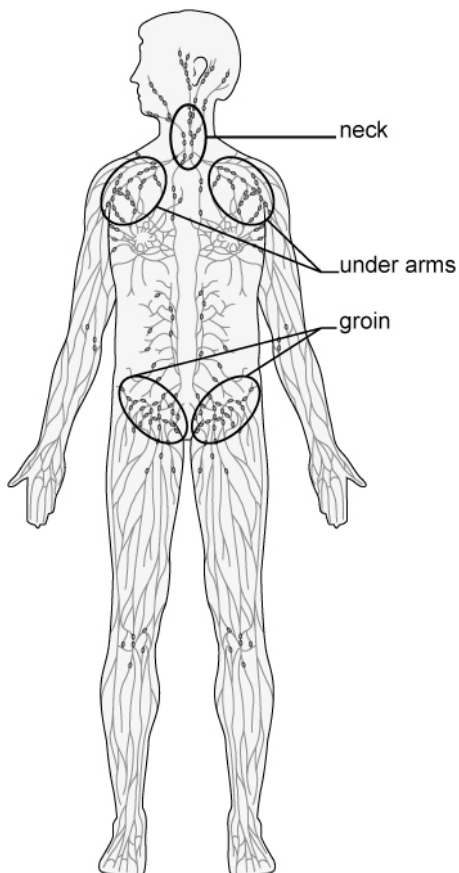
Lymphatic vessels collect the lymph from body tissues and drain it into the blood after it has been filtered by several lymph nodes.

Lymphatic flow is the flow of lymph fluid in your lymphatic system.

What is the lymphatic system?

The lymphatic system is made up of lymph nodes, lymph vessels and lymphoid organs, such as the tonsils and spleen. The picture below shows the lymph vessels and lymph nodes in different areas in your body. There are 600 to 800 lymph nodes throughout the body. The circles show the clusters (groups) of lymph nodes that are commonly removed during some cancer treatment.

The lymphatic system



Lymph nodes are round, kidney or bean-shaped lymphatic organs that filter away harmful materials (such as cancer cells, pathogens, dust, dirt) from lymph fluid. They help fight infection.

Our lymphatic system collects and filters fluid from all the tissues in our body. In the lymph nodes, waste products are removed or broken down into smaller parts. The lymph fluid returns to the circulatory system (heart, veins and arteries) just before the blood enters the heart. If the pathways the lymph travels through are blocked or damaged, fluid and proteins can build up in your tissues.

How can breast cancer treatment cause lymphedema?

Your lymphatic system can be damaged if you were treated for cancer by having:

- surgery that involved removing the lymph nodes (sentinel lymph node biopsy or axillary lymph node dissection)
- radiation to lymph nodes
- radiation to an area of your body where lymph nodes were removed

Once you have had these treatments you are at risk for lymphedema in the affected area of your body for life. Usually if someone develops lymphedema, it develops within 3 years of cancer treatment. Swelling after surgery is normal and not a sign of lymphedema.

Symptoms of lymphedema

You may have symptoms of lymphedema in the affected area(s) of your body. Patients with breast cancer often have these symptoms in the arm or chest:

- swelling, including swelling that comes and goes
- a feeling of tightness, fullness or heaviness
- aching, stiffness or pain
- reduced movement in the affected area of your body that may cause you to feel tired when doing everyday activities and exercise

Answers to frequently asked questions

How can I reduce the chance of getting lymphedema?

- Regular exercise
- Keeping a body weight in a range that is healthy for you
- Taking care of your skin
 - treat cuts or other open areas so they do not get infected
 - look for signs of infection, such as heat, redness, pain or swelling
 - moisturize the skin every day to make sure it's protected from damage
- Check for any of these early signs of lymphedema, and see your family doctor, nurse practitioner or oncologist if you notice any symptoms

Can I use my arm for infusions or blood tests?

- When having chemotherapy, or other IV medication, your health care team will use the best vein and rotate between arms. Using only one arm can cause pain and medication to leak out of the vein. Your health care team will also rotate arms to prevent poking an area multiple times to place an IV line.
- There is no evidence that having blood tests or receiving IV medication on your arm where you had surgery or radiation will cause lymphedema or make lymphedema worse.
- It is safe to use either arm right after surgery.

Can I use my arm to check my blood pressure?

You can use blood pressure cuffs on either arm if you do not have lymphedema.

If your doctor diagnosed you with lymphedema, we recommend that you take blood pressure on the arm without lymphedema, if possible.

Note: Sometimes you may need to use the arm with lymphedema to check your blood pressure. This carries a very low risk of harm.

What if you think you have lymphedema?

Talk to your surgeon, radiation oncologist, family doctor or nurse practitioner. You can ask about a referral to the Cancer Rehab and Survivorship Clinic at Princess Margaret for assessment and treatment.

If you are diagnosed with lymphedema you can choose to see a community lymphedema therapist or a combined decongestive therapist (CDT). See more information below.

Where can I find more information about lymphedema?

Lymphedema Association of Ontario

Website: www.lymphontario.ca/Lymphedema

Lymphedema Awareness eLearning

Website: <https://pmcancerclasses.ca/course/view.php?id=27>

National Lymphedema Network (US)

Website: www.lymphnet.org

Lymphnotes

Website: www.lymphnotes.com

Lymphedema Lifeline Foundation (US)

Website: <https://lymphedemalifeline.org/resources Canadian>

Lymphedema Framework (CLF)

Website: www.canadalymph.ca

UHN Health Information

https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/How_to_Manage_Your_Lymphedema.pdf

For a list of therapists near you and more information see:

Lymphedema Association of Ontario

Website: <https://www.lymphontario.ca/directory>

Cancer Health Information

Princess Margaret Patient and Family Library

610 University Avenue, Main Floor (Room M-502)

Phone: 416 946 4501 ext. 5383

Website: www.library.theprincessmargaret.ca

Email: patienteducation@uhn.ca

The Patient & Family Library offers trusted information about:

- cancer
- cancer treatment and care
- support organizations and services

You will find computer stations, books, brochures, DVDs, audio books, and eBooks. Trained staff and volunteers can answer your questions and help you to find the information and resources you need.



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