



Lymphedema: Prevention

What is Lymphedema?

The lymphatic system is part of your body's circulatory and immune system. It's a network of organs, vessels and nodes that move lymph fluid from your tissues back to your heart. All lymph fluid travels through clusters of lymph nodes to be cleansed before returning to the heart.

Lymphedema is swelling that occurs in the body due to injury or removal of some parts of the lymphatic system. Due to this injury, the lymphatic system cannot adequately drain the naturally-occurring lymph fluid, causing the fluid to accumulate and swelling to occur. The most common cause of lymphedema is lymph node removal during surgery. Radiation therapy also disrupts the normal flow of lymphatic fluid, and can be a cause of lymphedema. General surgery and tumors may also lead to lymphedema. Where the injury to the lymphatic system occurs will dictate where lymphedema may develop.

Due to recent advancements in surgical procedures, radiation therapy and education, the risk of lymphedema has decreased. Although most patients have a low risk of developing lymphedema, it's important to understand this condition so you can best prevent and treat it, if necessary.

Please read through this education packet and talk with your healthcare provider if you have any further questions. If you experience any of the signs or symptoms listed below, please contact your healthcare provider.

Signs and Symptoms of Lymphedema

- A feeling of heaviness or fullness in your at-risk area
- Clothing and jewelry does not fit as well
- Difficulty moving joints in your at-risk extremity
- Visible swelling or loss of joint contours
- Your skin becomes shiny



Modifiable Risk Factors

Body Mass Index (BMI)

- A number calculated from your weight and height, BMI is an indicator of the amount of fat in your body.
- For adults: 18.8-24.9 is considered normal, 25-29.9 is overweight, 30 and above is obese.
- A BMI over 25 is thought to increase your risk of developing lymphedema, and the higher your BMI, the greater your risk.

Activity Level

- Current research shows that exercise helps decrease your risk of lymphedema, even resistive exercises if performed correctly.
- If you are concerned about exercise, please consult with a lymphedema therapist or a provider knowledgeable of current lymphedema practice, to determine a safe and effective exercise routine.

Smoking Cessation

- Smoking causes narrowing of the blood vessels, which negatively affects the health of your skin. This might not only increase your risk of lymphedema, but may make your symptoms worse if you do develop lymphedema.

Good Practice to Promote Increased Lymph Flow

Maintain full active range of motion in your at-risk extremity.

- There are specific stretches and exercises that can help increase your range of motion. Please consult with your medical team if you feel you need assistance achieving your maximum range of motion.



Don't wear clothes or jewelry that indent your skin due to being too tight.

- Bras, bracelets, watches, shirt sleeves and socks are common culprits.
- If you've caused an indentation in your skin, you have also decreased lymphatic
- flow through this area.

Don't get your blood pressure taken on or have any needle sticks in your at-risk extremity.

- Medical literature is not definitive about the actual risk involved, but there are reports of blood pressure cuffs causing lymphedema in at-risk patients.
- Ask your healthcare providers to simply use another extremity.

Infection and Injury Prevention

Infections and injury in an at-risk limb cause increased lymphatic flow and raise your risk of developing lymphedema. Take good care of your body by following these precautions:

- Avoid excessive heat or cold.
- If ice or heat is recommended for pain control, please consult with your health care provider to determine the safest application for you.
- If you get a cut or scratch, take good care to keep it clean and dry. Look for any signs or symptoms of infection and contact your doctor immediately if you think you may have an infection.
- Avoid harsh detergents or deodorants, which can cause skin sensitivity and possible skin reactions.
- Keep your skin well-lubricated to avoid dry, cracking skin.
- Always wear sunscreen when in the sun to protect your skin.



Signs and Symptoms of Infection

- Redness in the at risk extremity or around a wound
- Increased skin warmth around a wound or in the at risk extremity
- Elevated body temperature (fever)
- Colored or smelly discharge from a wound
- Flu like symptoms: fatigue, general feeling of discomfort, illness or uneasiness .

Lymphedema Resources

- MSBGS can provide current, research- based treatments for all stages of lymphedema.
- The National Lymphedema Network is a great resource for all information related to lymphedema. Read their position papers on prevention, located in the FAQs section. Go to lymphnet.org.
- Visit the American Cancer Society website, cancer.org, and search by lymphedema.
- Visit the National Cancer Institute website, cancer.net, and search by lymphedema.