

# Lymphedema (swelling of arms and legs) (Page 1 of 2)

## What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema (LIM-fuh-DEE-mah) is a swelling in the arms or legs caused by a buildup of fluid (lymph). In some cases, such as immediately following surgery or soon after radiation therapy, this swelling is only slight and temporary. In others, the fluid accumulates for years, and finally builds to the point where the skin hardens and the limb becomes red, painful, and bloated. In addition to being very uncomfortable, lymphedema can make it harder for wounds to heal, and can lead to serious infections of the swollen limb.

## What is lymph fluid?

Lymph is a clear, colorless fluid that carries proteins, waste products, and infection-fighting white blood cells to and from body tissues. Like blood, lymph flows throughout the body in vessels that push the fluid toward the heart. Along the way, it passes through lymph nodes under the arm and in the neck and groin. These nodes are small, bean-like organs that help fight disease and filter out bacteria and toxins.

## What causes lymphedema?

Although not actually a side effect of chemotherapy, lymphedema can be caused by cancer or cancer treatments. Patients treated for breast cancer are particularly at risk because the surgeon may remove lymph nodes or vessels near a tumor to see if the cancer has spread. Also, radiation therapy can cause scarring in the vessels or nodes, blocking the flow of lymph. With fewer working lymph nodes and vessels, the affected arm or leg can become swollen with excess fluid.

## What should I look for?

The earlier lymphedema is found, the easier it is to treat. Talk to your doctor immediately about any of these symptoms:

- Your arm or leg appears red, swollen, or infected
- Your clothing, rings, socks, or shoes seem tighter, yet you haven't gained weight
- The skin of your arm or leg feels warm, tight, or tender
- Your arm or leg feels weak, achy, or heavy

## How is lymphedema treated?

There is no known cure for lymphedema, but your doctor can recommend treatments that will keep it from getting worse, lessen the swelling, and reduce the risk of infection. A physical therapist or other specially trained healthcare professional can apply light massage to help move fluid toward the heart, recommend special clothing that gently squeezes the limb, demonstrate how best to keep your swollen arm or leg raised, and show you some remedies you and your family can try at home.

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*Ask your doctor or nurse for additional ways to cope with, or relieve, lymphedema. Call your doctor if you experience any worsening.*

**The information contained herein is not comprehensive and is intended only as a guide.**

