

# Lymphedema

## What is lymphedema?

Some cancer survivors may experience lymphedema as a side effect of surgeries or the type of treatment they needed for their cancer. Lymphedema is a condition that affects your lymphatic system, which is made up of tissues and organs in your body. These tissues and organs produce, store and carry the white blood cells that help fight infections and other diseases.

Lymphedema - is swelling of arms, legs or trunk that occurs from the build-up of lymph fluid. Lymph fluid is the clear fluid that travels through the lymphatic system and carries cells that help fight infections and other diseases. Lymphedema stops lymph fluid from flowing freely in your body and often causes swelling in your body that you can see and feel.

Lymphedema is a very treatable condition. If you experience lymphedema it isn't because your health care team didn't do a good job of treating your cancer. Sometimes radiation damages lymph nodes and lymphedema can't be avoided. Surgeries that remove your lymph nodes are also sometimes a necessary part of treating your cancer. This is unfortunate, but your health care team's primary goal was to treat your cancer. Now, they can work with you to prevent or manage any aftereffects you might experience. While it may seem frustrating at times to have to worry about health conditions after you have survived something like cancer, it's important to be aware of your risks of aftereffects like lymphedema and watch for symptoms to increase your chances of early detection.

## Who might be at risk for lymphedema?

People who have had the following procedures are at risk for developing lymphedema:

- Biopsy
- Lumpectomy
- Simple mastectomy or Modified radical mastectomy with node dissection in the axilla (armpit )
- Surgery or biopsies that sample lymph nodes or disrupt lymph flow in the groin or axilla (armpit); these may include surgeries for prostate and gynecological cancers and melanoma
- Sentinel lymph node mapping procedures (use of dyes and radioactive substances to identify lymph nodes that contain tumor cells)
- Survivors of the following cancer types are at risk for developing lymphedema:
  - Breast cancer
  - Melanoma
  - Prostate cancer

- Ovarian cancer
- Head and neck cancers
- Cancers involving lymph node dissection and radiation to the lymph nodes
- Hodgkins
- Other factors such as being seriously overweight, having diabetes and high blood pressure as well as other medical problems. Inadequate diet as well as taking certain medications such as steroids may put a survivor at risk for lymphedema.

## **What are some symptoms of lymphedema?**

Some of the symptoms of lymphedema are:

- Noticeable swelling of the arms, legs or trunk
- Feeling of fullness or discomfort in an arm or leg
- Not being as flexible in the hand, wrist or ankle
- Sudden and extreme difficulty fitting into your clothes
- Sudden and extreme tightness of rings, watch or bracelet
- Infections that won't go away or keep coming back in the same area
- Feeling of tightness in the skin (which may be felt even before there is noticeable swelling)
- Pain or deep ache or affected limb feeling full or heavy

Symptoms and swelling may appear for a short time, disappear without treatment and then may return permanently. When you notice any symptoms, write down when they happened, what you were doing and what, if anything, made it better. Sometimes when the swelling comes and goes often, it might be the beginning of lymphedema. Early detection and treatment are very important. Once swelling becomes constant, it is not reversible, but only manageable. You may be the first to notice your symptoms of lymphedema, so look over your body regularly for changes.

## **Why does cancer or its treatment sometimes cause lymphedema?**

Even though other non-cancer conditions can cause lymphedema, it often happens after a treatment that changes your lymph nodes. Remember, lymphedema does not happen because your treatment wasn't done correctly. However, you might want to understand why certain treatments sometimes cause lymphedema.

Cancer-related procedures that increase the chances of developing lymphedema include:

- Biopsy: A biopsy is when tissue around your tumor is removed for testing. This may damage lymphatic pathways and may allow bacteria to enter the body through the break in the skin. Damage to the lymph pathway and infection both cause increased congestion, a first step in the development of lymphedema.

- **Surgery:** You may have lymph nodes removed during surgeries for melanoma or breast, gynecological, head and neck, prostate, testicular, bladder or colon cancer. This puts survivors at risk of developing lymphedema.
- **Lymph node mapping:** Lymph node mapping involves the injection of a dye to trace the flow of lymphatic fluid from the tumor to the nearest lymph nodes. This may cause damage to the lymphatic system.
- **Radiation therapy:** Radiation kills cancer cells that might be left behind after surgery. Radiation therapy often causes fibrosis or thickening of the tissues in the area of your body that received radiation. The thickening of the tissue may make it harder for lymph fluid to flow from your legs and arms into the middle of your body.

## **When could lymphedema happen?**

Lymphedema can occur during treatment or years after your treatment ends. Because there isn't an exact time period where you might be at risk, it's important to go for check-ups and look for changes in your body that might be symptoms of lymphedema. Whether or not you will get lymphedema or when really depends on the type of cancer you had, the type of treatment you received and how your body handled it all.

## **Is there a cure for lymphedema?**

There is no cure for lymphedema, but you can manage it with quick and effective treatment. Getting it diagnosed early and treating any temporary swelling you might experience can prevent chronic (permanent) lymphedema from happening. The lymphatic system can function at a higher level when your body needs it to do so, but only for a brief period of time. Once the lymphatic system fails to keep up with how much fluid your body needs it to pump, it may not do a good enough job of moving the fluid where it needs to go in your body. An infection can cause damage to the lymphatic system. It is very important to protect the lymph vessels in order for the lymphatics to work as well as they can.

## **Strategies for managing and preventing Lymphedema**

- Watch for even slight increase in size or swelling of the arm, hand, fingers, chest wall, trunk or legs.
- Avoid having injections, finger sticks, or blood draws from the arm that might be at risk for lymphedema.
- Do not have blood pressure checked from the at-risk arm
- Avoid vigorous, repetitive movements against resistance with the at-risk arm or leg.
- Avoid heavy lifting or putting excessive pressure on the affected limb. Establish a safe exercise program.
- Avoid extreme temperature changes on the at-risk arm or leg. (Such as hot tubs)
- Protect affected limbs from the sun at all times.

- Minimize chances of any injury: bruising, cuts, sunburn or other burns, sports injuries, insect bites, animal bites or scratches to the affected arm or leg
- Take special precautions when traveling by air
- Exercise should not be avoided but strategies developed with your health care provider to avoid lymphedema exacerbations.

If you notice any symptoms of lymphedema please contact your healthcare provider.

\*\* Seeing a physical therapist early can help prevent long term complications with Lymphedema.\*\*\*

## Resources

National Lymphedema Network (NLN)

[www.lymphnet.org](http://www.lymphnet.org) <<http://www.lymphnet.org/>>

Email: [nln@lymphnet.org](mailto:nln@lymphnet.org) <<mailto:nln@lymphnet.org>>

Phone: To listen to recorded information, call 1-800-541-3259. To speak to a representative, call 510-208-3200, Monday-Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (PST).

## Local Resources

### **Cancerlifeline.org**

Lymphedema classes and additional resources

**Julie Venn, LMP**, # 253-288-8835

Specialized in fitting cancer survivors for custom made lymphedema garments of any kind.

### **Mary Catherine's**

901 Broadway

Seattle, WA 98122 – 4309

### **National Lymphedema Network**

800-541-3259

### **NW Lymphedema Center**

(206) 782-5598

## Works Cited

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[www.livestrong.org](http://www.livestrong.org)

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