



ARE YOU AT RISK?

BREAST CANCER-RELATED LYMPHEDEMA 101

What is the lymphatic system?

The lymphatic system is the body's filtration system. It consists of organs, ducts and nodes located throughout your body.

The lymphatic system has several functions:

- It drains fluid from tissues back into the bloodstream
- It filters the clear fluid called lymph
- It filters the blood
- It provides immune cells which fight infection

What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema (pronounced lim-fa-DEE-ma) is the result of the lymphatic system being unable to transport lymph fluid through an affected area of the body.

When lymphatic tissues or lymph nodes have been damaged, destroyed or removed, lymph cannot drain normally from the affected area. Excess lymph fluid builds up and results in swelling that is characteristic of lymphedema.

There are two types of lymphedema. **Primary lymphedema** is caused by a faulty lymphatic system and is often genetic in origin.

Secondary or acquired lymphedema can develop as a result of surgery, radiation, infection or trauma.

What is secondary lymphedema related to breast cancer?

If you have been treated for breast cancer you may be at risk of developing lymphedema which causes swelling of the chest, arm or hand. The swelling may be accompanied by numbness, discomfort, and sometimes by infection.

Lymphedema is not life-threatening but it can occur immediately after surgery or months, even years, after cancer treatment. Early intervention can lessen its impact.

What are some of the signs & symptoms of breast cancer-related lymphedema?

Experts agree that recognizing early symptoms and starting treatment promptly is a good way to manage the condition.

- Your arm or chest feels full or heavy and tires easily
- Your arm or chest feels achy or numb
- Your skin feels tight
- You notice less movement or flexibility in your chest, shoulder, wrist or hand
- Your clothing or jewellery feels tight in the affected area
- If you experience a sensation of heat or skin redness, consult your doctor immediately

What treatment options are available?

You can help yourself by learning about lymphedema risk reduction and management from the healthcare professionals involved in your care.

Treatment for lymphedema may focus on therapies to decrease or contain the swelling. Contacting a specialist with training in lymphedema therapies is a good place to start. With the help of a certified lymphedema therapist, you can reduce the risk of developing lymphedema or manage an existing condition.

The most common treatment is Complete Decongestive Therapy by a certified lymphedema therapist. Treatment includes: skin care, Manual Lymphatic Drainage massage, compression bandaging and garment fitting.

Exercise has many benefits including decreasing the risk of cancer recurrence or of developing lymphedema. It also helps improve flexibility, wellbeing and overall quality of life.

Risk reduction: What can you do? Here are some strategies you can follow now.

Skin Care

- Avoid trauma or constriction to the affected area
- Avoid injections or blood pressure monitoring on the affected area
- Use a skin moisturizer
- Apply antibiotic cream immediately to small skin abrasions or cuts
- Practice careful nail and cuticle hygiene to prevent entry points for infection
- Avoid saunas or hot tubs if you have lymphedema

Diet

- Maintain a healthy body weight

Compression Therapy

- Compression garments can help reduce swelling
- Consult a certified lymphedema therapist for proper fitting and advice

Infection

- Infection can be serious in those who have had surgery to the lymph nodes as it can cause lymphedema or worsen an existing condition.
- If you notice skin redness, swelling or heat to the affected area, call your doctor immediately