The lymph system moves fluid throughout the body. Lymph nodes and vessels filter bacteria and toxins to help fight infection.

Lymphedema is swelling in part of the body caused by a build-up of lymph fluid. This can happen if lymph vessels are damaged or if lymph nodes were removed during surgery. It can also be a side effect of radiation treatment. For example, after removal of lymph nodes in the armpit or radiation to the lymph nodes in the armpit, swelling due to lymphedema may happen in that arm.

There are ways to prevent lymphedema or keep it from getting worse. This factsheet gives information about signs and causes as well as tips to manage it.

**Signs of Lymphedema**

Lymphedema is most common in a limb such as the arm or leg. It can also happen in the face, neck, or abdomen. Symptoms may happen slowly over time or quickly if you have an infection or injury. **Tell your health care provider right away** if you have any of these signs:

- Full, uncomfortable feeling in specific area
- Pressure or tightness under the skin
- Itching, aching, or burning feeling
- Trouble moving a joint in the arm or leg
- Indent that stays longer than normal after skin is firmly pressed

**Causes of Lymphedema**

Lymphedema can happen days, months, or even years after radiation treatment or cancer surgery. These are possible triggers:

- Being overweight
- Infection
- Insect bites
- Overuse or injury
- Sunburn or heat exposure
- Little movement for a long time such as on an airplane or car ride

**Ways to Treat Lymphedema**

**Complete decongestive therapy (CDT)** is the standard treatment. It uses specialized massage, compression bandages or garments, and exercises to reduce swelling and soften thickened skin. A Lymphedema Therapist can help with a CDT plan that is right for you.

**Tips to Prevent Lymphedema**

**Reduce Swelling**

- Wear compression garments as directed.
- Get drainage massages to stimulate lymph vessels and direct fluid away from the area.
- Elevate the affected limb when sitting or sleeping.
- Avoid wearing tight clothing, watches, and jewelry.

**Prevent Infection and Injury**

- Wash hands often with a mild soap.
- Avoid cuts, scrapes, burns.
- Keep fingernails clean. Push back cuticles, don’t cut.
- Use an electric or disposable razor for shaving.
- Avoid blood pressure checks and needle sticks such as blood draws on the affected side.
- Wash cuts or scrapes well; use antibacterial ointment.

**Stay Active, but Take It Slow**

- Keep a healthy weight.
- Do exercises to help move fluid and keep muscles and joints limber. Your health care provider and Lymphedema Therapist can plan a safe exercise routine.
- Avoid sitting in the same position for more than 30 minutes at a time. Stand up or do arm exercises from time to time.
- Take frequent rest breaks when doing repeat movements such as scrubbing or mopping.
- Avoid lifting or carrying anything heavy.

**Protect Your Skin**

- Wear gloves to do dishes, clean, or do yard work.
- Keep your skin moist with hypoallergenic lotion.
- Wear sunscreen with SPF 30+ when outside.
- Use insect repellent to avoid bites.

**Keep It Cool**

- Avoid very hot showers or baths.
- Wear long oven mitts when handling hot food.
- Don’t get in hot tubs or saunas.
- Don’t use heating pads on the affected area.

**Travel Smart**

- Drink plenty of water. Choose non-carbonated drinks.
- Wear compression garments when flying.
- Remember to move around or stretch often.

Lymphedema Therapists give treatment and teach patients to recognize and manage swelling on their own. To make an appointment, call 801-587-4091.