



CANCERcare®

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fact sheet

COPING WITH LYMPHEDEMA

Lymphedema is a common side effect of cancer treatment. By learning about this diagnosis and its treatment options, communicating with your health care team, and surrounding yourself with a support network, you will be better able to manage your lymphedema and experience a better quality of life.

WHAT IS LYMPHEDEMA?

Lymphedema is a painful swelling that happens when your body's lymphatic fluid is unable to circulate properly and builds up in your soft tissues. People with cancer who have undergone lymph node removal and/or radiation as part of their treatment are at risk for developing lymphedema. Lymphedema most commonly occurs in the arms or legs. Lymphedema can be managed successfully with a combination of medical treatment, lifestyle changes and at-home remedies.

WHO GETS LYMPHEDEMA?

Lymphedema is somewhat unpredictable and doctors do not fully understand why some people develop lymphedema and others do not. People who have had several lymph nodes removed and/or radiation treatment in the axillary area (underarms) during cancer treatment are at higher risk of developing lymphedema.



Lymphedema can occur after treatment for any type of cancer, but it is most commonly associated with breast cancer, prostate cancer, lymphoma, melanoma and cancers in the pelvic area such as bladder, testicular or gynecological cancers. Obesity, lack of exercise and infections after surgery are also risk factors.

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR HEALTH CARE TEAM ABOUT LYMPHEDEMA:

Talk to your doctor about your risk for developing lymphedema. Be sure to report any symptoms you experience related to lymphedema. Having complete, accurate information about lymphedema from your doctor or nurse can help you feel prepared to manage this condition.

Signs and symptoms of lymphedema:

- Swelling in the arm or leg (clothes or jewelry feel tighter)
- Arm or leg feeling heavy or tight
- Weakness, decreased flexibility, difficulty moving
- The skin thickens (hyperkeratosis) or hardens
- Pain and redness in the arm, hand, leg or foot

STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO MANAGE YOUR SYMPTOMS:

Consult your doctor as soon as symptoms arise. In addition to swelling of the affected limb, the most common problems are pain, hardening of the skin, and loss of mobility. Lymphedema must be

(over)

addressed by a medical professional. If left untreated, it can get worse and may cause permanent damage.

Wear a compression garment. Non-elastic bandages and compression garments, such as elastic sleeves or tights, place gentle pressure on the affected area. This can help drain the lymph fluid and reduce swelling. It's important to wear a compression garment when flying, even on short flights, as air pressure changes can lead to increased swelling. Be sure to consult your doctor and ask if you should be fitted for a compression garment.

Consider having a manual lymphatic drainage (MLD) massage. This type of massage helps move the fluid out from where it has settled. Afterwards, the affected limb is wrapped in low-stretch bandages that are padded with foam or gauze.

Exercise. Physical activity can help prevent swelling. Ask your health care team when it is safe for you to start exercising. Consider attending physical therapy or consult with your health care team for a program of special exercises that are safe for you to perform.

Skin care. Keep your skin moisturized with lotion or creams. Avoid sunburn by wearing sunscreen or protective clothing outdoors. Always wear gloves when gardening or removing items from the oven or stove to help protect your skin.

CancerCare® Can Help

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit www.cancercares.org or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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Avoid injuries and treat infections. Try to avoid scratches and bruises to the at-risk area. Always treat cuts or infections and seek medical help if the problem persists.

Be gentle with your body. Carrying heavy packages, luggage, or shoulder bags puts stress on your affected limb and could cause additional swelling and pain. Try to use the opposite limb if possible.

Complete decongestive therapy (CDT). CDT combines skin care, manual lymphatic drainage, exercise, and compression. Talk to your doctor to see if CDT is right for you.

FINDING FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR THE TREATMENT OF LYMPHEDEMA:

Some insurance companies do not cover treatments or supplies related to lymphedema. Oncology social workers at CancerCare can help you find financial resources to help with these expenses. Call 800-813-HOPE (4673) for more information.

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