



Center for Integrative Oncology and Survivorship

Lymphedema: What You Need to Know

Here are answers to questions that patients often have about lymphedema.

What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema can be “primary” or “secondary.” Primary lymphedema is caused by malformed lymph vessels present from birth. Secondary lymphedema is swelling that occurs when the lymph system has been disrupted because of surgery, radiation, infection, disease or trauma. As a result, this system cannot adequately move lymph fluid and proteins through the body.

Who is at risk?

Research results vary depending on the type of treatment option needed. Fortunately, the risk of developing lymphedema has declined over time. Patients who have axillary lymph node dissection have a lifetime risk of 15-25%. Patients whose surgery is limited to sentinel node techniques without adjuvant radiation have a risk of about 6%.

Obesity and infection in the skin of the arm or leg can cause or worsen lymphedema. Lymphedema most often occurs during or after treatment but can develop anytime.

What are common signs of lymphedema?

- Persistent swelling, even if it comes and goes
- Full or heavy feeling in an arm or leg
- Skin that feels tight
- Hardness or firmness in an arm or leg
- Decreased flexibility in a limb
- Clothes or jewelry that do not fit well on one side
- Skin that “weeps”

Is there a cure?

No. However, lymphedema usually can be managed well with the help of specially trained therapists. Our goal is to reduce the affect that lymphedema has on your lifestyle and prevent it from getting worse.

How do I know if I will get lymphedema?

There is no way to tell, but most people will not develop lymphedema. However, it is important to seek evaluation and treatment early if lymphedema occurs. It is equally important to reduce risk factors.

Can I prevent lymphedema?

There is little research on what activities may increase your risk of developing lymphedema. According to the National Lymphatic Network, people at risk for developing lymphedema should do the following:

- Maintain good skin care (including hygiene) and use a moisturizer to prevent cracking
- Avoid skin irritants and bug bites
- Limit trauma to the affected limb, especially falls and burns
- Use the unaffected (“good”) arm for blood pressure, injections and IV tubes, if possible
- Avoid restrictive clothing and jewelry
- Avoid extreme heat and cold
- Consider the pros and cons of wearing a compression sleeve for air travel and physical activity
- Use sunscreen and skin protecting clothes

How is lymphedema treated?

Physical therapists use a combination of techniques to reduce or prevent lymphedema from getting worse:

- Compression: During treatment, we may use special bandaging techniques or Velcro garments to reduce swelling in an arm or leg. At the end of treatment, we will help you get a compression garment to manage your lymphedema.
- Manual lymph drainage: Specially trained physical therapists and some massage therapists perform hands-on treatment to “jump start” your lymph system and re-route fluid away from problem areas.
- Skin care: Therapists will discuss how to care for your skin to prevent infection.

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- Exercise: Therapists will direct you to perform exercises with your compression wraps or garments on to decrease fluid build-up in your arm or leg. They also may discuss exercise recommendations.
- Education: We will give you the information you need to make better choices for yourself about lymphedema.

What if lymphedema goes untreated?

Generally, lymphedema is progressive. Thus, it should be treated as soon as you notice symptoms. Left untreated, lymphedema can lead to increased limb swelling, increased risk of infection, skin changes and difficulty using the limb.

Is lymphedema treatment covered by insurance?

If you are seeing a physical therapist for lymphedema, treatment is covered like any other physical therapy service. Any limits and co-pays will apply. Insurance companies often do not cover bandaging supplies and garments, however. Call your insurance company to find out your benefits.

Community resources for compression bandaging supplies and garments are available. If you cannot afford to buy bandages or a garment, we will help you find funding if it is offered at your income level.

*GHS' Lymphedema Management Program is part of Oncology Rehab. If you have questions, please call **(864) 455-1346**.*