



# Lymphedema

## What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is swelling caused by a build up of lymph fluid. This can happen when the lymph system is damaged or blocked by infection, injury, cancer, removal of lymph nodes, and other treatments, like radiation therapy. Lymphedema is most likely to develop in an arm or leg but also occurs in other parts of the body. It can have an important impact on quality of life.

## Symptoms of lymphedema

Lymphedema affects the lymphatic system which has three main functions – draining extra fluid in tissues and blood, fighting infection and absorbing fats (nutrients).

### In the beginning, lymphedema may cause symptoms, such as:

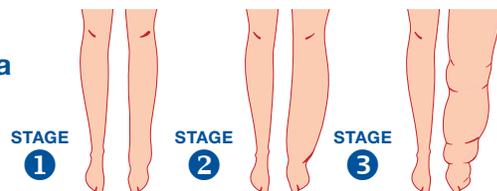
- swelling and a heavy or achy feeling in your arms or legs that may spread to the fingers or toes
- a dent when you press on the swollen area
- swelling (edema) that is soft to touch and usually not painful at first
- a feeling of tightness when wearing clothing, shoes, bracelets, watches or rings

### Lymphedema that is not controlled may cause:

- more swelling, weakness and trouble moving an arm or leg
- a tight, full or heavy feeling in the skin; pressing on the swollen area does not leave a dent
- a tingling sensation, like pins and needles in the affected body part
- thickening of the skin

These symptoms may develop very slowly over time or more quickly if there is an infection or injury. Tell your health care provider right away if you notice symptoms of lymphedema.

## Stages of Lymphedema



## How is lymphedema diagnosed?

Lymphedema is usually diagnosed through a health history and physical exam.

A health care provider will consider past illnesses and treatments that could cause lymphedema, such as removal of lymph nodes. During a physical exam, the provider will check for health issues as well as symptoms of the condition. Measurements may be taken to determine the extent of any swelling and to track swelling over time.

Though less common, imaging tests, such as ultrasound or MRI, may also be used for an in-depth look at the lymph system.

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## How do you treat lymphedema?

The goal of treatment is to reduce swelling and pain, to improve arm and leg mobility, and to help patients keep up their daily activities. Treatment is often more effective the earlier it starts.

### Treatment may include the following:

- compression garments (sleeves, stockings, bras, shorts, gloves), compression devices, bandages
- manual lymphatic drainage
- exercises and stretching
- laser therapy
- surgery
- weight loss
- physical therapy and/or occupational therapy

## How do you manage lymphedema?

### Keep skin and nails clean and cared for to prevent infection.

- Keep skin moist with lotions and creams.
- Treat small cuts with antibacterial ointment. Watch the cuts and if redness develops, call your health care provider.
- Avoid needle sticks in the affected body part.
- Avoid hot water, which may burn the skin.
- Use bug repellent and sunscreen to avoid bug bites and sun burns.

### Avoid blocking the flow of fluids through the body.

- Change positions frequently.
- Do not carry handbag, luggage or bags on the affected body part.
- Wear loose clothing.

### Keep blood from pooling in the affected limb.

- Raise the affected body part above the heart when possible.
- Avoid blood pressure checks in that arm/leg.

### Additional Resources

- National Lymphedema Network: [lymphnet.org](http://lymphnet.org)
- Lymphie Strong: [lymphiestrong.com](http://lymphiestrong.com)
- Washington University Program in Physical Therapy: [pt.wustl.edu](http://pt.wustl.edu)
- STAR (Sports Therapy and Rehabilitation) BJC HealthCare: [barnesjewishwestcounty.org/star](http://barnesjewishwestcounty.org/star)

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