

How to Reduce the Risk of Arm and Breast Swelling After Lymph Node Biopsy or Surgery

Lymphedema

The lymphatic system removes extra fluid from body tissue into the bloodstream.

Lymphedema is the swelling of body tissue that can be caused by tissue damage or lymph node removal. Some people without cancer get lymphedema but the main cause in the U.S. is cancer or cancer treatment, such as surgery, radiation or lymph node removal.

This swelling most often occurs in your breast or arm. Only the side of your body that had damage or nodes removed would be affected.

Lymphedema can develop right away after surgery or many years later. All people who have had lymph node surgery have the potential to develop lymphedema.

Breast Lymphedema

Breast lymphedema is swelling in the breast. (You may refer to this part of your body as top or chest.) In most cases, this type of swelling is found in people with larger breasts who had a lumpectomy and radiation. Some people who have a mastectomy develop this as well.

Breast swelling can develop right away after surgery or radiation, or a year or more later after cancer treatment is done. It is usually treated with lymphedema therapy and a compression bra.

Breast lymphedema is usually easier to control than arm lymphedema. It also has a lower rate of infection.

Early symptoms include breast heaviness or tenderness, pain in the breast, and sometimes tissue sensitivity.

If you develop breast lymphedema, it does not necessarily mean that you will develop arm lymphedema.

If you develop any symptoms, ask your health care team for a referral to see a certified lymphedema therapist.

How to Lower Your Risk

There is no way to prevent lymphedema but there are guidelines for reducing your risk of developing it.

You will see and hear a lot of information about lymphedema “prevention.” It focuses on limiting things that can cause swelling in the affected area.

These sources usually tell people who could develop lymphedema to do the same things as people who already have it. This can be confusing.

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There is no proof that limiting all things that could cause swelling will keep you from getting lymphedema. Some people are careful to follow all of the limitations and still develop lymphedema. Some people do nothing after surgery and cancer treatment and never have problems with swelling.

Risk-reduction guidelines

The guidelines below have the most evidence-based proof:

- Early detection is extremely important to prevent severe swelling and problems using the affected area over time.
- You are more likely to get lymphedema if you are obese. Talk with your primary care provider about a healthy weight for you.
- You will be less likely to have swelling if you have more muscle mass in your arm. Exercise to improve muscle mass is beneficial.

The biggest risk factor for developing lymphedema is lymph node removal. Because of this, your health care team recommends that you see a certified lymphedema therapist after lymph node biopsy or removal.

It is important that you know what symptoms to watch for during and after treatment. The sooner you recognize symptoms, the easier they will be to treat.

What You Need To Do

- If you do not have an appointment to see a certified lymphedema therapist after lymph node removal, ask your health care team for a referral.
- Talk with your primary care provider if you have concerns about your weight.

What to Watch for

- Check for early symptoms of lymphedema:
 - changes to your skin
 - skin feels sore or tight
 - your arm feels heavy
 - you have a cut or burn that does not heal
 - your clothing feels tighter
 - your rings, shirts, pants or socks do not fit as well.
- You will often hear that you should not get blood pressure or blood draws in the arm that had lymph node removal. Research does not show that this will cause lymphedema.
 - Talk about this with your health care provider or surgeon. Together, you can decide if you want to limit blood pressures and blood draws on the side you had surgery.
 - You should tell all members of your health care team that you have had a lymph node biopsy or removal and are at risk for lymphedema.

Check Your Skin

Get in the habit of checking your skin for signs of increased swelling, or tight or thickened tissue. Look at your skin creases to see if they are thicker.

Do this often. Symptoms do not usually show up and go away. Usually, when lymphedema is starting, symptoms will slowly get worse over time.

Whom to Call

- Call your health care team **right away** if you have:
 - **rapid, severe swelling**
 - redness, warmth or tenderness in the affected area
 - blisters or rash
 - chills
 - fever
 - questions or concerns for infection.
- For specific information on your own medical history and risk of developing lymphedema, make an appointment to see a cancer rehabilitation specialist. (These doctors are experts in managing and treating lymphedema.)
 - You do not need a referral to schedule this appointment.
 - Call 612-863-2123 to make an appointment.

Resources

- **Lymphatic Education & Research Network**
lymphaticnetwork.org
- **Lymphology Association of North America**
clt-lana.org
- **National Cancer Institute**
cancer.gov
- **American Cancer Society**
cancer.org
- **National Lymphedema Network**
lymphnet.org