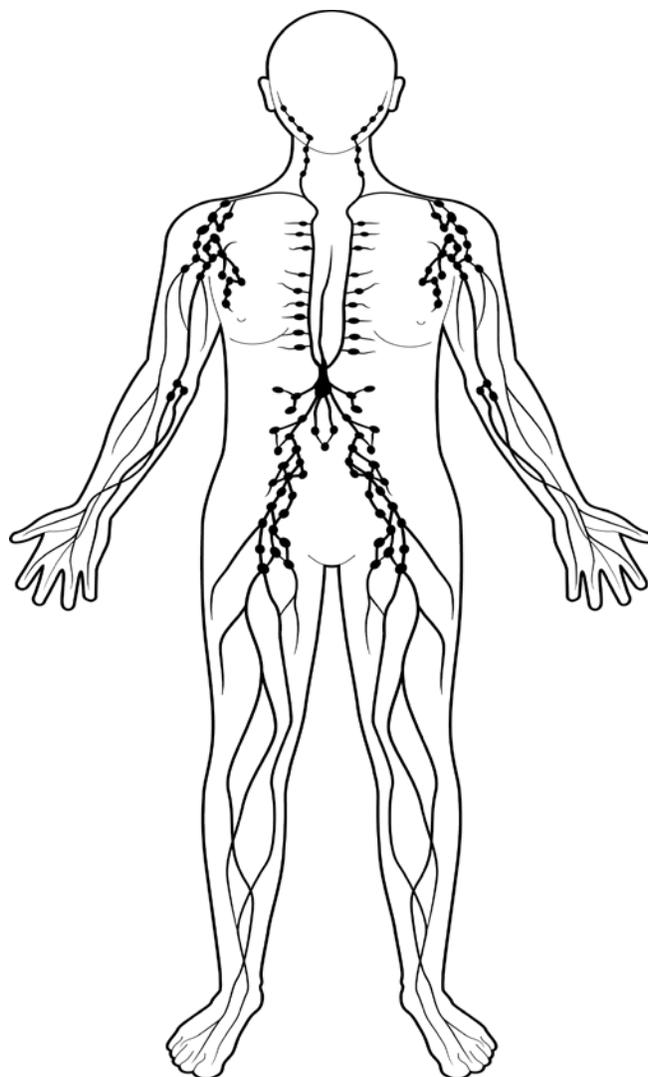


Lymphedema

The swelling of your arm or leg after treatment may be lymphedema. You may have swelling in your hands, wrist or feet. Lymphedema is the build up of fluids in your tissues. This build up of fluid results from the lymph nodes being:

- removed during surgery
- damaged from radiation therapy
- blocked because of cancer



This image shows some of the lymph nodes.

The increase in fluid and swelling may come and go. Your arm or leg may ache, feel heavy and uncomfortable. You may feel some tingling in your arm and fingers or leg and toes. You may have a harder time doing some activities.

We do not always know why some people have lymphedema and others do not. Most of the time it is because of lymph node surgery or radiation to the lymph node areas. Very rarely cancer recurrence or a blood clot in the affected arm or leg can block lymph nodes and lymph vessels preventing fluid from draining properly (your doctor may order x-rays to see if this is the case). This causes swelling which can become permanent.

This handout describes how to manage lymphedema and prevent problems related to lymphedema.

Prevent infection and injury

Take care of the skin of the affected arm or leg:

- Keep your skin clean. Wash skin with a mild soap and moisturize with scent free cream or lotion daily.
 - Maintain a healthy weight and exercise.
 - If you injure the skin clean the wound with soap and water. You may use an antibiotic ointment. Watch for signs of infection and seek medical help if the wound shows increasing redness, pain, swelling, or if you get a fever.
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Ways to prevent an increase in lymphedema:

Medical tests

- Do not have your blood pressure taken on the affected arm or leg.
- Do not have IVs, needles or blood tests in the affected arm or leg.

House and yard work

- Wear gloves with yard work, washing dishes and housework.
- Prevent burns: use an oven mitt when baking.
- Prevent sunburns: use sunscreen and wear protective clothing in the sun.
- Prevent insect bites: use insect repellents.
- Prevent pet scratches.
- Avoid repetitive arm movements such as painting.
- Do not carry or lift heavy items such as a suitcase until you build up your body strength.
- Use a thimble when sewing.
- Wear comfortable footwear at all times.

Personal care

- Push back your cuticles. Do not cut cuticles or hangnails. Do not bite your nails. Keep nails clean and short.
- Use an electric razor for shaving your armpit or leg.
- Do not wear tight jewellery such as bracelets, rings and watch bands.
- Avoid pressure on your shoulders with backpacks, purses and thin bra straps.
- Do not wear tight or restrictive clothing, tight socks or cuffs.

Temperature

- Avoid extreme water temperature changes when washing dishes and bathing.
 - Use caution with hot tubs and sauna. It is best not to use them.
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Arm or Leg Exercises

A handout of gentle exercises designed to help increase the drainage of lymph fluid from your arm or leg was given to you at the Lymphedema Clinic. These exercises are very important and should be used as a lifelong strategy to help reduce problems from lymphedema.

For more information go to: <http://www.hamiltonhealthsciences.ca/>
Click on the Patient Education tab and then search for Lymphedema

Do these exercises along with deep breathing 3 to 4 times a day. You can do them while you are doing your regular activities such as washing the dishes and watching TV.

You may want to consider taking Tai Chi, Yoga, and Qi Gong as these types of exercises help with deep breathing.

Maintain a healthy body weight

Being overweight may increase lymphedema. It is very important to keep your weight under control. If you would like a referral to a dietitian, contact the Lymphedema Clinic or your oncologist.

Exercise and weight loss often go hand in hand, but be sure to warm up and cool down after exercising. Helpful exercises include swimming and light weight training. You may prefer to exercise with a trainer if you are unsure how to exercise safely.

To help lessen the discomfort and decrease swelling

- Raise your arm or leg above heart level for short periods of time (10 minutes), if it feels comfortable.
- If your arm or leg feels achy do not apply heat or ice.
- Tylenol plain or extra strength may be used as directed on the packaging.

Compression garments

Compression sleeves, gloves, stockings and gauntlets are the types of compression garments used for lymphedema. These garments are made of strong elastic fabrics. **They are worn during the day and removed at night. They should be worn every day for maximum benefit.**

Compression garments lose their elasticity and are not as effective so need to be replaced every 4 to 6 months. They are only available through prescription. They are expensive and part of the costs can be paid for through Assistive Devices Program (ADP).

You can apply for ADP funding if you:

- are a resident of Ontario
- have a valid OHIP card
- need a device for at least 6 months of regular daily use

For more information about ADP go to www.health.gov.on.ca

Call toll free – 1-800-268-6021

TDD/TTY – 1-800-387-5559

Other treatments for Lymphedema

Manual lymph drainage

Special type of massage specifically for lymphedema done by qualified therapists. This massage helps to move lymph fluid out of the arm or leg. After the massage a compression garment must be worn to help maintain the reduction of lymph fluid.

Another type of treatment called combined decongestive therapy uses manual lymph drainage massage with compression bandaging or wrapping the arm or leg. This is done daily for several weeks and when the arm or leg is smaller a compression garment is used daily.

Pneumatic compression pumps

This is a mechanical pump equipped with a sleeve. The sleeve has chambers that are filled on and off with air. A compression garment must be worn after treatment. To date, no research studies have been published that shows which pumps are most effective or how long treatment should last.

The pumps are expensive to buy or rent. If you have an infection in your arm or have had problems with blood clots, a pump should not be used.

Other treatments

You may have heard of other treatments for lymphedema such as surgery low level laser therapy, TENS or drug therapy. However, there are no research studies that show benefits with these treatments. More research is needed to find out if these treatments are of benefit for lymphedema treatments.

Resources

Pathfinder from the Patient and Family Resource Centre in the lobby at the Juravinski Cancer Centre.

To find support/information

www.lymphnotes.com

www.cancer.ca

www.facingcancer.ca

www.lymphontario.ca

To find a therapist:

Lymphedema Association of Ontario

4800 Dundas St. W., Suite 203

Toronto, ON Canada M9A 1B1

1-877-723-0033 | 416-410-2250 | Fax: 416-546-8991

info@lymphontario.ca

www.lymphontario.ca

www.torontolymphocare.com

www.lymphovenous-canada.ca

www.vodderschool.com

To understand the research evidence:

www.cmaj.ca/cmaj/cgi/content/full/164/2/191



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