

Reducing Your Risk of Lymphedema

After Breast Surgery or Radiation

This handout explains lymphedema, how you can reduce your risk of developing it, and when to get help.

What is lymphedema?

Your lymphatic system is made up of lymph nodes, organs, and vessels. Its job is to remove lymph fluid build-up and waste from your body.

Certain treatments for breast cancer, like radiation, surgery, and lymph node removal, can change the way lymph fluid flows in your body. These changes can make it harder for lymph fluid in the treatment area to move to other parts of your body. If the lymph vessels cannot remove enough lymph fluid, the fluid can build up and cause mild to severe swelling, called lymphedema.

Lymphedema usually occurs in the area of your body that was treated with radiation or had lymph nodes removed. People who have many lymph nodes removed and/or receive radiation therapy may have a higher risk of developing lymphedema, but it is not fully understood why some patients are more likely to develop it. Caring for your arm and breast may help reduce your risk.

To learn more and watch a video on lymphedema, visit:
FredHutch.org/lymph-support-services

How can I reduce my risk of developing lymphedema?

The guidelines on the next page may help lower your risk of developing lymphedema and infections.

Please keep in mind that everyone's situation is unique. Your risk for developing lymphedema may vary depending on your history of cancer treatment, along with other risk factors you may have. Talk to your oncologist or a certified lymphedema therapist to learn about what you can do to reduce your risk of developing lymphedema.

Please note: These **are not** prevention guidelines. There is little research about how to reduce risk, so some of these recommendations use a common-sense approach based on the body's structure and experience by experts in the field.

Guidelines for reducing risk

Avoid injury or trauma

- Avoid injections, blood draws, and any other needles such as for IVs going into your at-risk arm (the arm on the side that had treatment) if possible, especially if you had a node(s) removed under your arm or radiation under your arm.
- Clean cuts or scratches on your at-risk arm with soap and water. If the cut or scratch increases in redness or pain, apply an antibiotic ointment and bandage to the area to help prevent infection.
- Wear gloves when gardening, cleaning, or using products that could irritate your skin.
- Wear sunscreen and insect repellent as needed.

Avoid putting pressure on your arm

- When taking your blood pressure, use the arm that has not had treatment if possible, especially if you had an axillary node dissection or axillary radiation.
- Keep your purse, bag, and backpack straps from digging into your shoulders.
- Avoid lying on your at-risk arm, especially in the weeks right after surgery.

Keep up a healthy lifestyle

- Maintain a healthy weight to lower stress on your lymphatic system.
- Gradually build up the length of time and intensity of activities using your arm. This will help you avoid muscle strain.
- Use your at-risk arm normally as long as you can manage the pain and you are following the guidelines in this handout.

Discuss extreme temperatures and air travel with your certified lymphedema therapist

- Until you talk with your certified lymphedema therapist, avoid activities where there are extreme temperatures, such as hot tubs, saunas, and steam rooms.
- Before taking an airplane trip, discuss your swelling risk with your certified lymphedema therapist.

Discuss procedure options if you had lymph node surgery under both arms

- Ask your provider about options for checking your blood pressure, blood draws, and any other needles such as for IVs. Generally, we recommend using the arm with the least amount of lymph nodes removed. Sometimes it is recommended that you use your foot or leg for these procedures.

When to get help

It is normal to have some mild swelling for a few months after your surgery. Call your care team if you have any of the symptoms on the next page in the area that was treated.

When to get help, continued

- Increased swelling, or swelling that does not go away a few months after your surgery
- Feels full or heavy
- Harder to see your veins or tendons
- Problem getting movement and strength back

Lymphedema is not an emergency, but an infection can be serious. Call your care team **now** if you have **all** or **most** of these signs of infection:

- Flu-like symptoms (fever, chills, body aches)
- In the area that was treated:
 - Pink/redness on skin
 - Pain
 - Heat
 - Increased swelling