



What is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema (lim-fa-DEE-ma):
chronic swelling (edema)
caused by a buildup of fluid (lymph).

Lymphedema is a lifelong condition caused by a buildup of lymphatic fluid. This happens when the lymphatic system is either faulty or damaged and cannot function as normal. It leads to chronic (long-lasting) swelling in the tissues where the lymphatic system is blocked. Most often the swelling is in an arm or leg, but it can also be in the breast, trunk, genitals or head and neck.

What does the lymphatic system do?

Its main functions are to:

- Keep a balance of fluid in the tissues
- Move proteins and digested fats
- Help fight infection by removing viruses and bacteria

It is a vast network of **lymph vessels** (that transport and drain lymph fluid) and **lymph nodes** (that filter out germs and other risks to our health). We have clusters of lymph nodes in our head, neck, armpits, stomach and groin. However, the number, size and location of lymph nodes vary from person to person.

Who develops lymphedema and why?

Primary lymphedema occurs when a person is born with a faulty lymphatic system. It may be inherited from birth or develop later in life.

Secondary lymphedema is more common. It occurs when a person's lymphatic system is damaged by surgery, radiation therapy or severe injury (e.g. a burn or skin infection).

Secondary lymphedema can develop a short time after the damage occurs or many years later.

People who are treated for some cancers (e.g. breast, prostate, gynecological, melanoma or lymphoma) have a lifelong risk for lymphedema if they have had lymph nodes or vessels removed or damaged during treatment.

Secondary lymphedema may also develop due to surgery unrelated to cancer and other causes such as severe trauma, recurring infections, venous insufficiency or filariasis.

Lymphedema due to "secondary" causes usually develops in the part of the body where the lymph vessels or lymph nodes have been damaged.

Lymphedema affects men, women and children of all ages.

Am I at risk for lymphedema?

Your risk for lymphedema depends on a number of factors, including:

- Family history of chronic swelling
- If you have surgery, the number of lymph nodes removed or damaged
- If you had radiation therapy or an injury, the degree of damage to your lymphatic system
- Having chronic sinus disease
- Being overweight or inactive adds to these risk factors

What are the signs and symptoms of lymphedema?

If you notice any of the following signs, see a health professional:

- Swelling that can be sudden, gradual or occasional
- Clothing, shoes or rings/watches may feel tighter
- Feelings of heaviness, tightness, fullness or heat
- Aches, shooting pain or pins and needles
- Less joint movement and mobility
- Infection of the skin (called cellulitis)

How is lymphedema diagnosed?

If you notice signs of lymphedema, see a health professional as soon as you can. They will review your medical history, examine the swelling and other symptoms, and check for signs of lymphedema. They will also do tests to rule out other causes of swelling.

Can lymphedema be treated?

The best treatment to control lymphedema and manage the swelling is decongestive lymphatic therapy from a trained and certified lymphedema therapist. It includes:

- Education about skin care to reduce the risk of infection
- Compression bandaging and daily wear of compression sleeves or stockings to reduce and contain swelling
- Exercises to promote lymphatic function and flow
- Lymphatic drainage (a special type of gentle massage) to improve lymph flow, direct fluid to other drainage pathways, and unblock or soften hard tissue

With early diagnosis and treatment, you can take control of lymphedema and lower your risk of it getting worse.

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