



## How can I lower my risk for lymphedema?

If you're at risk for lymphedema, or living with it, these self-care tips will help:

Lymphedema cannot be prevented or cured. Nor can we predict who's going to develop it.

- **Practice good skin care**  
Moisturize to avoid dry, cracked skin. Apply sunscreen and avoid high summer heat to prevent burning. Use insect repellent and protective clothing against bites. Wear gloves to protect your hands when gardening, cooking or cleaning. Use an electric shaver instead of a razor when shaving your underarms or legs.
- **Lower your risk for infection** Take care of scratches, pinpricks, cuts, burns or splinters right away. Get treated for skin problems, including inflammation, fungal infections, ingrown toenails or dermatitis.
- **Exercise regularly at a moderate pace** to build strength, stamina, flexibility and prevent injury. Start slowly when you begin any new activity. Try to get active and stay active!
- **Aim for a healthy body weight** by eating lots of fruits and vegetables, with less red meat and processed foods. If you think you are overweight, speak to a health professional about healthy weight loss ideas.

- **Try to avoid skin punctures** If possible, avoid having injections, blood tests or vaccination shots on the affected limb.
- **Avoid high temperatures** by staying indoors in the high heat of summer, staying away from spas/saunas and taking warm, rather than hot, baths and showers.
- **Avoid tight clothing or jewelry**, such as rings, watch bands or tight sock tops on the affected limb.
- **Take it easy!** Whatever you do, give yourself more time and take extra breaks.

### Cellulitis: *Skin Infection*

Cellulitis is a sudden, non-contagious bacterial infection of the tissues under the skin. Infection can enter the body through a break in the skin, fungal infections (under nails) or from an existing wound or skin inflammation.

People with lymphedema are at risk for cellulitis because their lymphatic system is less able to fight infection.

Watch out for these signs of skin infection:

- Skin that is swollen, hot, red or has a reddish rash
- Skin that feels painful to the touch
- Flu-like symptoms, feelings of nausea, fever or chills

**Seek medical help right away as cellulitis can spread quickly, and you need antibiotics to treat it.**

## Is there any medication I can take?

Diuretics are not recommended. However, if you take diuretics for another condition, keep taking them and speak to a health professional about your options.

At this time there is no medication to treat or cure lymphedema.

## Where can I go for support?

### You are not alone.

Being diagnosed with lymphedema can be emotional. You may feel angry, sad or upset about how lymphedema affects your life. But there is support for you. Across Canada there are trained lymphedema therapists, patient-focused organizations and other people living with lymphedema who can help you.

Visit the Canadian Lymphedema Framework's website ([canadalymph.ca](http://canadalymph.ca)) for links to associations, therapists, and programs and services in your area, including support groups, helplines, educational events and advocacy campaigns.

## Hope for the future

Research is helping us better understand lymphedema. Advances in diagnostic imaging, surgical techniques, possible drugs and our ability to predict lymphedema, give us hope that how we detect, treat and manage it in the future will improve greatly.



Alberta Lymphedema Association

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Lymphedema  
What you need to know





# 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 lymph flow 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 present 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, obesity, 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:

- A family history of chronic swelling
- If you had 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 venous 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.**