

Understanding **Lymphedema** (Swelling of a Limb)

What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is the build-up of fluid in your tissues. It is caused by a blockage or slowdown in the lymph system. It most often occurs in the arms or the legs. It is not the same as water retention and requires a very different treatment. Lymphedema results from:

- Lymph nodes being removed during surgery
- Lymph nodes being damaged from radiation therapy
- Cancer in the lymph nodes or a blood clot

How do I know if I have lymphedema?

You may have swelling in your arm, breast, leg or genital area. The limb may ache, feel heavy and uncomfortable. The swelling may be present at all times or it can come and go.

Why do some people get lymphedema and others do not?

There is no easy answer to this question. If you had lymph nodes removed, had treatment in your armpit or groin, or if your cancer returns in the lymph nodes, you have a higher risk for developing lymphedema. Not everyone with these risk factors will develop swelling. There is no way of knowing who will develop lymphedema.

Can lymphedema be prevented?

If possible, surgeons only remove the lymph nodes that drain the area of the tumour. This is called sentinel node biopsy. Radiation oncologists always try to spare as much of the lymph system as possible when treating the cancer.

What can I do?



If you notice swelling in your arms or legs, tell your doctor or nurse. You will need to be checked for other conditions that produce similar symptoms. They can refer you to the LHSC Lymphedema Clinic if appropriate. You should:

1. **Protect your skin.** For example, wear gloves when gardening and avoid walking barefoot.
2. **Pets.** Avoid scratches when playing with animals.
3. **Avoid insect bites.** Use insect repellants and avoid mosquito-infested areas.
4. **Fingernails.** Keep your fingernails and toenails short, but avoid cutting the cuticles. Avoid using scissors to trim nails. For fingernails, avoid artificial nails.
5. **Shaving.** Use an electric razor to remove hair. Do not use razor blades.

6. **Injections and blood draws.** If possible, avoid injections or blood draws in the affected arm or leg.
7. **Piercing and tattoos.** Do not get piercings or tattoos on the affected arm/leg area.
8. **Minor injuries.** In case of minor injuries, always carry an alcohol swab, antibiotic ointment and bandage with you. Take care of minor injuries immediately to reduce risk of infection.
9. **Bathing.** Avoid hot showers/baths (temperatures should be below 38.9C (102F)). This includes saunas, hot tubs and whirlpools.
10. **Sun exposure.** Avoid getting sunburned. Use sunscreen and cover the affected area with appropriate clothing.
11. **Massage therapy.** Avoid massage on the affected arm/leg and associated quadrant. Manual lymph drainage is not considered to be a form of massage.
12. **Clothing.** Avoid clothing that is too tight (ARM – tight bras, sleeves. LEG – underwear, pants, socks)
13. **Jewelry.** Avoid tight jewelry (ARM – rings, bracelets, wrist bands. LEG – toe rings, elastic bands around ankles)
14. **Weight.** Maintain a healthy body weight.
15. **Air travel.** Wear your compression garments during the flight. You may also need an additional short-stretch bandage on top of your garment because low cabin pressure can make lymphedema worse.

LHSC Lymphedema Clinic



If you have been diagnosed with lymphedema, ask your Primary Nurse or Oncologist for a referral to the Lymphedema Clinic at LHSC. You can also call this clinic for help locating a specialized provider in your local community if you do not live in the London area. Contact the LHSC Lymphedema Clinic at 519-685-8117.

For more information, you can also contact:

- The Lymphedema Association of Ontario (416-410-2250 or www.lymphontario.ca) for a list of therapists
- The Ministry of Health and Long-Term care ADP program (416-327-8804 or adp@ontario.ca) for a list of ADP authorizers in your community



This is information only and does not replace medical advice. Always ask your health care provider if you have any questions or concerns.