



Lymphedema Information and Prevention

What is lymphedema?

In some cases, removing lymph nodes during surgery can slow down the proper drainage (movement of fluid) of your lymphatic system. When this happens, extra fluid builds up in the area where the lymph nodes were taken out. This extra fluid is known as **lymphedema**. You can get lymphedema on the side of your body where you had surgery, on your arms, hands, breasts, or torso (chest, stomach, and back).

What is my risk for developing lymphedema after surgery?

- Most people do not develop lymphedema after surgery. It's hard to know a person's risk.
- During a sentinel lymph node biopsy, we only remove one or a few lymph nodes to check for cancer. The risk of developing lymphedema from this surgery is low (about 5%).
- During an axillary lymph node dissection, we remove more than a few lymph nodes. The risk of developing lymphedema after this surgery is higher than the sentinel lymph node biopsy, but only about 15-25% of people getting this surgery may develop lymphedema.
- Other things that can increase your risk for developing lymphedema include:
 - Radiation therapy to the affected armpit
 - An infection or severe injury
 - Tumor growth in the affected area
 - Having a higher weight or body mass index (BMI)

What are the signs of lymphedema?

Lymphedema may come on suddenly or slowly. It can happen a few weeks, months, or years after your surgery. Watch for these signs of lymphedema:

- A feeling of heaviness, aching, or pain
- Skin changes, such as pitting or a tight feeling
- Swelling
 - You may notice your rings are tighter, or that your shirt sleeve on your affected side feels tighter than normal.

How can I lower my risk of developing lymphedema?

To reduce the risk of lymphedema, it is important to avoid infection and swelling. You are more likely to get lymphedema if you get an infection.

Do the following to reduce your risk of getting an infection:

- Be careful not to get sunburned. Use sunscreen daily.
- Use insect repellent to avoid bug bites.
- Push your cuticles back with a cuticle stick (instead of cutting them) on your affected hand.
- When gardening, washing dishes, or cleaning, wear protective gloves.
- Be careful shaving under your affected arm.

You can also avoid infections by caring properly for cuts, scratches, and burns.

Caring for cuts and scratches:

1. Clean the cut or scratch with soap and water.
2. Apply antibiotic ointment.
3. Cover the area with a bandage.

Caring for burns:

1. Run the area under cool water or apply a cold pack for 10 minutes.

2. Clean the burn with soap and water.
3. Cover the area with a bandage.

What can I do to reduce swelling after surgery?

After your surgery, it's normal to have some mild swelling. This is often temporary and will slowly go away, but it may last for up to 6 weeks.

To help reduce swelling after surgery and lower your risk of lymphedema, follow these guidelines:

- Do the recommended exercises 5 times a day.
- Continue the exercises for 4-6 weeks until you get your normal range of shoulder and arm movement back.
- Stay at or work toward a healthy body weight.

When should I contact my healthcare provider?

If you notice signs of infection (redness, swelling, tenderness, skin that is warm to the touch), call your healthcare provider.

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