



**ROGEL CANCER CENTER**  
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN HEALTH

# Lymphedema Information and Prevention

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## **What is lymphedema?**

**Lymphedema** is swelling that occurs when there is build-up of lymphatic fluid in the soft tissues. Lymphedema can be caused by any change to your lymphatic system, which can happen through surgery, injury, or radiation. A person can get lymphedema on the side of their body where they had surgery, on their 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.
- 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 about 5% (meaning 5 out of 100 people who get this surgery will develop lymphedema).
- During an axillary lymph node dissection, we remove more than a few lymph nodes. The risk of developing lymphedema after this surgery is about 20-30% (20-30 out of 100 people).
- 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

## **What are the signs of lymphedema?**

Lymphedema can happen a few weeks, months, or years after your surgery. Signs of lymphedema include:

- A feeling of tightness, pressure, heaviness, aching, or pain in the affected area
- A change in how your jewelry or clothing fits on the affected area
- Swelling that does not get better 6-8 weeks after surgery

### **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.

### **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:

- 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.

### **How can I lower my risk of developing lymphedema?**

- Be careful not to get sunburned. Use sunscreen daily.
- Use insect repellent to avoid bug bites.
- When gardening, washing dishes, or cleaning, wear protective gloves.
- Be careful shaving under your affected arm.
- Properly care for burns.
  - Run the burned area under cool water.
  - Apply a cold pack on the burn for 10 minutes.
  - Clean the burn with soap and water.
  - Cover the area with a bandage.

- Avoid infections by caring properly for cuts or scratches on your skin.
  - Clean the cut or scratch with soap and water.
  - Apply antibiotic ointment.
  - Cover the area with a bandage.

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