

Swollen Arms or Legs

Online version with active resource links at: cancer-help.me/swollenarmsandlegs

Lymphedema

Is the medical term for swollen arms and legs.

What is lymphedema? It is a condition that happens when either a loss of function or structural damage to the lymph node system occurs. The term "edema" means swelling. Hence, lymphedema literally means swelling due to the disruption of the flow of lymph fluid. This fluid may build up in the tissue causing swelling.

Lymphedema is a common side effect of breast cancer treatment, although it can be associated with other cancers, as well.

Tell your health care provider right away if you notice symptoms of lymphedema.

Exercise and lymphedema

- Talk to your doctor about what kind of exercise may be best for you.
- Studies have shown that slow, carefully controlled exercise can be safe and may even prevent lymphedema from developing.

Because lymph system help fight infections and other diseases, it is important to keep skin and nails clean and cared for.

Bacteria can enter the body through a cut, scratch, insect bite, or other skin injury. Fluid that is trapped in body tissues may allow bacteria to take hold and cause infection. Look for signs of infection such as redness, pain, swelling, warmth, fever, or red streaks below the surface of the skin.

Call your doctor right away if you notice any of these signs or symptoms as it is usually a medical emergency.

Careful skin and nail care helps prevent infection:

- Use cream or lotion to keep the skin moist.
- Treat small cuts or breaks in the skin with an antibacterial ointment.
- Avoid needle sticks of any type into the limb (arm or leg) with lymphedema. This includes injections, IV (intravenous) lines, or blood tests.
- Use a thimble for sewing.
- Wear gloves when gardening and cooking.
- Wear sunscreen and shoes when outdoors.
- Avoid testing bath or cooking water using the limb with lymphedema. There may be less feeling (touch, temperature, pain) in the affected arm or leg, and skin might burn in hot water more easily.
- Cut toenails straight across. See a podiatrist (foot doctor) as needed to prevent ingrown nails and infections.
- Keep feet clean and dry and wear cotton socks.

Avoid blocking the flow of fluids through the body.

It is important to keep body fluids moving, especially through an affected limb or in area where lymphedema may develop.

- Do not cross legs while sitting.
- Stand up or change sitting position at least every 30 minutes.
- Wear only loose jewelry and clothes without tight bands or elastic.
- Do not carry a heavy handbag on the arm with lymphedema.
- Do not use a blood pressure cuff on the arm with lymphedema.
- Do not use elastic bandages or stockings with tight bands.

Keep blood from pooling in the affected limb.

- Keep the limb with lymphedema raised higher than the heart when possible.
- Do not swing the limb quickly in circles or let the limb hang down. This makes blood and fluid collect in the lower part of the arm or leg.
- Do not apply heat to the limb.

Content adapted from websites below.

Resources for Additional Information:

- [American Cancer Society. Lymphedema](#)
- [NIH. NCI Lymphedema \(PDQ®\) Patient Version](#)
- [NIH. National Library of Medicine Compression Stockings](#)
- [Cancer.Net. Lymphedema](#)
- [NCI Managing Chemotherapy Side Effects. Swelling](#)
- [Chemocare. Swelling](#)
- [CancerCare.org. Coping With Lymphedema](#)

Recursos en Español:

- [Cancer.Net. Acumulación de líquido o linfedema](#)
- [Cancer.Net. Retención de líquidos o edema](#)
- [NIH. Instituto Nacional Del Cáncer. Edema](#)
- [Chemocare. Hinchazón](#)
- [American Cancer Society. Hinchazón](#)