



**Dana-Farber**  
Cancer Institute



**BRIGHAM AND  
WOMEN'S HOSPITAL**

## DANA-FARBER/BRIGHAM AND WOMEN'S CANCER CENTER

### Lymphedema: Arm or leg swelling

Lymphedema is a swelling of a part of the body, usually an arm or leg, that is caused by the buildup of lymph fluid. It can be caused by cancer or the treatment of cancer. There are many different types of lymphedema. Some types happen right after surgery, are mild, and don't last long. Other types can occur months or years after cancer treatment and can be quite painful. Lymphedema can also develop after an insect bite, minor injury, or burn.

Breast cancer patients are particularly at risk for arm lymphedema due to breast cancer in their lymph nodes or after treatment of breast cancer in which the underarm lymph nodes were removed or treated with radiation.

#### **Getting help with lymphedema from your doctor or nurse**

Your doctor or nurse may be able to help you find ways to prevent and relieve lymphedema. Ask about:

- Ways to keep your skin healthy - It is important to keep your skin clean. You should also keep it moist with lotion.
- Exercising to help the body drain the lymph fluid, and what types of exercise you should not do.
- Treating lymphedema. He or she may suggest:
  - Keeping the arm or leg raised above your chest.
  - Special massage that can help by moving the lymph fluid from where it has settled.
  - Special bandages and clothing that can help lymph fluid drain.
  - Losing weight.
  - Physical therapy with a physical therapist who focuses on lymphedema
- Finding sources of emotional support to help you cope.
- While many patients are told not to have their blood pressure checked or blood drawn on the side of prior breast/underarm surgeries, studies have shown that this does not increase the risk of developing lymphedema. Speak with your doctor about this if you have questions about blood pressures or lab draws.

#### **Preventing or relieving lymphedema**

Other cancer survivors have found these tips helpful:

- Watch for signs of swelling or infection (redness, pain, heat, fever). Tell your doctor or nurse if your arm or leg is painful or swollen.
- Keep your arm or leg free of cuts, insect bites, or sunburn. Try not to have shots or blood tests done in that area.
- Eat a well-balanced, protein-rich, low-salt diet.
- Keep regular follow-up appointments with your doctor.



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- Wear loose-fitting clothing on your arm or leg.
- Try not to use that arm or leg to figure out how hot or cold something is—such as bathwater or cooked food. You may be less able to feel hot and cold now.

### **When should you call for help?**

- If your arm/leg has signs of infection (redness, pain, heat), with or without a fever.
- If your lymphedema is getting worse and limiting your daily function.