

Taking care of myself to decrease the risk of lymphedema.

1

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Breast Cancer and Lymphedema

2



- Receiving a diagnosis of breast cancer is both frightening and challenging. At this point you undoubtedly have many questions about your disease and your treatment plan. The doctors and nurses who will care for you will be your partners in this healthcare journey. Don't hesitate to ask questions or share your concerns. They are here to help you.

It is unrealistic to expect yourself to process all the information you will be receiving at one time. For this reason, we have created a guide to help you address one specific potential problem – **lymphedema**. We will provide you with tips to avoid it from occurring. Use this guide as a reference between visits with your healthcare team. Make notes about any changes you experience. Our goal is to provide information which will enable you to actively participate in your recovery.

Keep this booklet accessible. Feel free to share it with your family, friends, and anyone else who will be helping you face this challenge. Every time you refer to this, remember your breast cancer team is available to help you-this is just another way we can accomplish that goal.





What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is swelling of the arm, hand, fingers, chest, or back on the side where you had your surgery (affected side). It may be uncomfortable. Lymphedema may occur any time after breast cancer surgery.

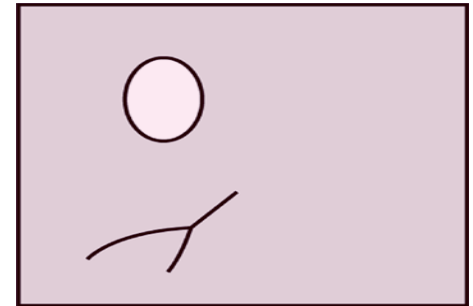
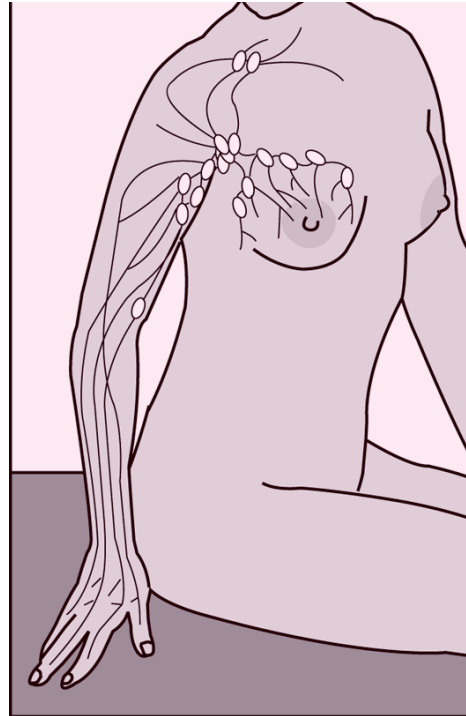


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Lymphatic System

The lymphatic system runs throughout the body. It is made up of ducts (similar to blood vessels), nodes and tissue. It carries lymph fluid, cells and other material. These materials are carried to the lymph nodes in a colorless fluid called lymph. Lymph nodes are small clumps of immune cells that act as filters for the lymphatic system. Lymph nodes also store white blood cells that help fight infections. Lymph nodes in the underarm are called axillary [AK-sil-air-e] nodes.

www.komen.org.



Lymph fluid drains through ducts. The fluid travels from your hand, up your arm and to your axillary nodes

Lymphedema

6



- Research has resulted in improvements in treatment for breast cancer that has dramatically reduced the risk of lymphedema.
- This is surely good news. There are however some treatments that continue to place patients at risk of developing it some time in the future.
- Lymphedema can occur during or anytime after cancer treatment. Following some precautions should increase your awareness and aid you in avoiding it from developing.

Some treatments increase your risk of lymphedema.

Research shows that some of the things we do to treat your cancer can increase your risk for lymphedema. These include:

- mastectomy
- lymph node removal
- chemotherapy
- radiation



Why do you tell me this if I can't avoid these risks?

You and your doctor may decide these therapies will be important to your cure. In that case, you will want to take special care to avoid the risk factors you can control.

- call your team if you see any signs of lymphedema
- take good care of yourself by taking the following action steps outlined in this guide.

Signs and Symptoms to watch for:



8

- Once you have recovered from your surgery, you might feel: pain, tingling, fullness, swelling, skin texture changes, arm weakness, decreased ability to move, stiffness, aching, and tightness of clothing or jewelry on your affected arm.
- If you experience any of these signs and symptoms notify your health care team immediately; a **QUICK RESPONSE** is extremely important.

Risk Reduction



9

Is there anything I can do to reduce my risks?

Yes

There are many things you can do to reduce the chance that you will experience lymphedema. For example you can:

- Eat well,
- Control your weight,
- Exercise,
- Drink plenty of water,
- Rest, manage your energy after your surgery,
- Perform proper care of your skin.

Risk Reduction

10



- Avoid repetitive constant motions with the arm/hand on the affected side.
- Do the things you enjoy with the people you enjoy.
- Let your team know if you are having any difficulty with arm swelling, fullness, or new symptoms.
- Keep a log with your progress and questions.

Tips to lower your risk of developing lymphedema.



- It is important to keep your body mass index between 21- 24, a body mass index above 29 greatly increases your risk of lymphedema development. (The next page gives you a body mass index chart, your breast team member will help you with this.)
- Exercise – start slowly and build slowly.
- Eat healthy, drink plenty of water.
- Healthy foods include: whole grains, vegetables, fruits, fish, poultry. (Eat 5 or more servings of fruits/vegetables per day.)

Tips to lower your risk of developing lymphedema.

12



- Avoid high calorie snacks.
- Write down everything you eat/keep a diary of why you are eating and what you are eating.
- Avoid high calorie drinks.
- While going through breast cancer treatment many women gain weight due to fatigue, eating to gain energy, and no exercise. Avoid this by exercising, avoiding unhealthy foods- substitute healthy foods, drinking plenty of fluids, and getting rest.
- Research has proven: the treatment for fatigue is exercise!



BMI Chart by BodyMassIndexChart.org

Height [feet and inches]	Weight [pounds]																
	100	110	120	130	140	150	160	170	180	190	200	210	220	230	240	250	260
4'6"	24	27	29	31	34	36	39	41	43	46	48	51	53	55	58	60	63
4'8"	22	25	27	29	31	34	36	38	40	43	45	47	49	52	54	56	58
4'10"	21	23	25	27	29	31	33	36	38	40	42	44	46	48	50	52	54
5'0"	20	21	23	25	27	29	31	33	35	37	39	41	43	45	47	49	51
5'2"	18	20	22	24	26	27	29	31	33	35	37	38	40	42	44	46	48
5'4"	17	19	21	22	24	26	27	29	31	33	34	36	38	39	41	43	45
5'6"	16	18	19	21	23	24	26	27	29	31	32	34	36	37	39	40	42
5'8"	15	17	18	20	21	23	24	26	27	29	30	32	33	35	36	38	40
5'10"	14	16	17	19	20	22	23	24	26	27	29	30	32	33	34	36	37
6'0"	14	15	16	18	19	20	22	23	24	26	27	28	30	31	33	34	35
6'2"	13	14	15	17	18	19	21	22	23	24	26	27	28	30	31	32	33
6'4"	12	13	15	16	17	18	19	21	22	23	24	26	27	28	29	30	32
6'6"	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	20	21	22	23	24	25	27	28	29	30
6'8"	11	12	13	14	15	16	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	29
6'10"	10	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
7'0"	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26

Underweight	Normal Range	Overweight	Obese
Underweight	Normal Range	Overweight	Obese

Exercise

14



- After surgery start using the affected arm. Follow your surgeon/nurse's advise. Balance between precaution and promotion. (The nurses will give you instructions regarding arm exercises.)
- Exercise your arm and use it normally to regain your range of motion and strength during your recovery.

Exercise



15

- Studies have shown that exercise helps reduce the risk of lymphedema. When exercising your affected arm: start slowly and build slowly. If there is arm swelling of the affected side you might need to wear an arm sleeve during exercise.
- Weight lifting is safe for women at risk for lymphedema. Remember start slowly and build slowly.



Exercise

16

Exercise improves your quality of life and strengthens your body, mind and spirit. It also burns calories, which helps control your weight. Exercise helps you decrease fatigue.



What is an arm sleeve?

17

If your affected arm is used excessively, a well-fitted compression sleeve which is worn on your affected arm may help prevent swelling.

Ask your healthcare team member for an arm sleeve prescription, to file a claim with your insurance company.



Compression Sleeve
Image © PriceGrabber

Avoid constant/repetitive motion of the affected arm/hand.

18

- If your cancer is on your dominant side (the side you write with), be careful not to overuse this arm/hand with constant/repetitive motions.
- Examples: constant computer work, manual labor with constant use of your affected arm/hand, athletic activities that require constant arm/hand use, providing sign language all day with your affected arm/hand, a factory worker performing the same constant motion with their affected arm/hand).
- **CONSTANT REPETITIVE USE of your affected arm/hand may cause lymphedema.**



The American Cancer Society has the following skin care recommendations:

19

- Avoid infections, burns, and injuries of the affected arm, underarm or chest.
- Keep your hands and cuticles soft and moisturized. Do not cut cuticles (push them back after bathing with a cuticle stick). Apply lotion; keep your skin clean and moisturized.
- If there is a skin opening, cleanse with soap and water, place an over the counter antibiotic cream over the site, and cover the wound with a clean bandage. Change the bandage at least daily, or more often if soiled.



- If a burn occurs apply ice for 15 minutes, then wash with soap and water and place a clean dressing over the area. If the burn is large, or has an open wound notify your health care provider.
- Notify your health care provider if you have swelling of the chest/arm/underarm on the affected side.
- Any time you see any sign of infection such as red streaks pus, increased heat, tenderness, chills, or fever notify your health care provider.
- Use an electric razor to remove underarm hair; it is less likely to cut your skin.



- Avoid blood pressures and blood draws on the affected arm.
- Be protective of your arm. Wear long gloves when working in the garden, when working with hot foods in the kitchen, and when cleaning with harsh materials.
- Use insect repellent and avoid bug bites.
- Wear bras that are proper fitting, with padded wide straps that do not dig into your shoulder or underarm.
- Wear loose fitting jewelry and clothing which is not constricting.



- **Avoid activities that irritate or chap your skin.**
- **Protect your skin, especially the affected area, from sunburn. Wear sunscreen that has at least an SPF of 15 or higher. Try to stay out of the sun between 10am and 4pm.**
- **Your affected arm may not feel hot or cold temperatures so always check temperatures with your non affected body part.**
- **Avoid extreme temperature changes. Heat from hot tubs and saunas, and heating pads used on the affected arm should be avoided.**



Make Healthy Choices, You **CAN** do this!

23

Contact information

- **The American Cancer Society 1-800-227-2345**
- **The Lymphedema Network 1-800-541-3259**



Notes



24

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