

## LYMPHEDEMA

Some cancer patients develop a complication known as lymphedema. Lymph is an infection-fighting fluid that circulates throughout the body; “edema” simply means swelling. So lymphedema is a buildup of lymph in the body that causes swelling. This can happen as a result of surgery, radiation therapy, infection or because of the cancer itself—anything that disrupts the lymphatic system and the normal flow of lymph.

Patients with breast cancer are especially susceptible to lymphedema, which can cause swelling of the breast, underarm area or the arm on the side where the cancer was. Patients who had lymph nodes removed as part of their breast cancer treatment (also known as lymph node dissection), are more likely to develop lymphedema. Patients with pelvic cancers, such as prostate cancer, can develop lymphedema, too. In those cases, lymphedema causes swelling of the abdomen, genitals or 1 or both legs. Lymph-edema also develops in patients who have lymphoma or melanoma.

In addition to swelling, patients with lymphedema may notice redness or heat in the affected area. Lymphedema can be uncomfortable or even painful. It can limit use of the swollen body part and sometimes causes infection. Lymphedema can develop days, weeks or even months after treatment.

It’s important to get early care for lymph-edema. According to the American Cancer Society, you should report the following signs to your physician as soon as possible:

- Fullness or heaviness in an arm or leg.
- Skin tightness in your arm or leg.
- Less movement in a hand, wrist or ankle.
- Tight fit in a sleeve or sock.
- Tight-fitting jewelry, such as a ring, watch or bracelet, when you haven’t gained weight.

Treatments for lymphedema include specialized massage, exercise, bandaging and compression garments. A physical therapist or other health care professional who is knowledgeable about lymphedema should provide this treatment.

You can help prevent or delay lymph-edema by taking special care of the limb or limbs that are likely to be affected (that is, the arm on the side where there was breast cancer, or your legs if you have a cancer in the pelvic area). For example:

- Keep the limb that might develop lymphedema clean and watch it carefully for signs of infection, such as a rash, tenderness, heat or swelling.
- If you normally shave the area, use an electric razor to reduce the chances of a cut or nick.
- Protect the limb from sunburn by using a sunscreen labeled “SPF 15” or higher. Avoid anything that tends to chap or irritate the skin on that limb.
- Avoid saunas, hot tubs and excessively hot showers and baths. Test the water with an unaffected limb.
- Avoid tight clothing in the area.
- Use the limb normally, but don’t overstrain or tire it. Do not lift heavy weights or participate in vigorous, repeated activity without checking with your physician first. For more information about lymph-edema, visit the National Lymphedema Network Web site at [www.lymphnet.org](http://www.lymphnet.org) or phone 800.541.3259.