

# Lymphedema

## What Is It?

Lymph is a thin, clear fluid that circulates throughout the body to remove wastes, bacteria, and other substances from tissues. Edema is the build-up of excess fluid. Lymphedema occurs when too much lymph collects in any area of the body, resulting in swelling or a feeling of heaviness. When lymphedema develops in people who've been treated for breast cancer, it usually occurs in the arm and hand, but it sometimes affects the breast, underarm, chest, trunk, and/or back.

## What Causes It?

Surgery and radiation for breast cancer treatment can cut off or damage lymph nodes and lymph vessels through which lymph moves. Over time, this can result in a backup of fluid into the body's tissues, resulting in lymphedema.

## How Common Is It?

It depends on the type of surgery you undergo, and whether you undergo chemotherapy and/or radiation. Lymphedema is rare in women who only have a sentinel node biopsy (3-7%), but may occur in up to 10-20% of women who have had an axillary node dissection. Chemotherapy and radiation can increase the risk of lymphedema.

Read more information about lymphedema prevention and treatment strategies.

## Can Lymphedema Be Cured?

- **Mild lymphedema** can be reversed, because there's no damage to the soft tissue yet. This goes away with treatment and never becomes a major problem.
- **Moderate/severe lymphedema** often cannot be completely reversed because the tissue under the skin has been damaged. However, the appearance and feeling of the hand, arm, chest, or other body part can be improved with treatment.

## Will I Have to be in Treatment for the Rest of My Life?

It depends on the severity of the lymphedema and how well it responds to treatment. Many patients will experience milder symptoms that flare up occasionally and require periodic treatment. Some patients will experience more severe and/or persistent symptoms that require active treatment for the rest of their lives. For most women, the severity lymphedema tends to change over time. Whether or not you are undergoing active treatment, you should always be aware of your risk for lymphedema, take the necessary precautions, and watch for early signs.