

# Breast Cancer-Related Lymphedema

## What is breast cancer-related lymphedema?

Lymphedema [lim-fi-dee-muh] is the build-up of lymph fluid in the soft tissues just under your skin. This swelling can occur after lymph nodes are removed or treated with radiation. It can be mild to severe. A person who has had lymph nodes removed or treated with radiation has a lifetime risk of developing lymphedema. It can occur in the:

- Hand
- Arm
- Breast
- Chest wall

## What puts me at higher risk of developing lymphedema?

The risk of developing lymphedema is higher:

- If you had lymph nodes removed during surgery.
  - » The more lymph nodes you have removed, the higher your risk is for developing lymphedema.
- If you had radiation as part of your treatment.
- If you are overweight or obese.

Talk to your care team about your risk for developing lymphedema.

## What are some signs of lymphedema?

- Swelling in the hand, arm, breast or chest wall on the side of your upper body where you had lymph nodes treated.
- Breast swelling, redness and/or fullness.
  - » Your bra may feel tighter than normal.
- Skin texture that feels tight, hard, or looks pink/red.
- Heaviness, tightness, or less flexibility in your arm, hand or fingers.
- Tightness in your clothing, watch, or ring but you have not gained weight.
- New aching or discomfort in your arm or breast.

**If you notice any of these signs, call your care team. It is best to catch it early.**

## What can I do to reduce my risk of lymphedema?

Attend your scheduled medical appointments. Ask your care team about your personal risk for developing lymphedema. There are other healthy habits you can do to help lower your lymphedema risk:

- Maintain a healthy weight. Talk to your care team to find out what a healthy weight is for you and ask them about resources to help you get to, and stay at, a healthy weight.
- Be active: Exercise is good! Slowly build up the amount of time you are doing any activity or exercise, and how hard you are working at it. Always follow the advice from your care team.
- Take care of your skin. Keep your skin well moisturized and protected from sunburns and bug bites. Wear gloves for activities that may cause skin injuries to your hand, such as yard work or when working with chemicals.
  - » If you get a cut, scratch, or other skin injury: wash the area with soap and water, apply over-the-counter antibiotic ointment and watch for signs of infection.
- Know the signs of infection and call your care team if you think you have an infection. Some signs of an infection are:
  - » Skin redness
  - » Pain
  - » Swelling
  - » Drainage from a break in the skin
  - » Warm to the touch
  - » Fever
- Talk to your care team about:
  - » What you do on the side of your body where you had lymph nodes treated, like:
    - Getting injections
    - Drawing blood
    - Taking blood pressure
    - Wearing tight clothing or jewelry
    - Getting new tattoos
  - » Using a hot tub or sauna
  - » Airplane travel
  - » Whether a physical or occupational therapist with experience in lymphedema management could help you.

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