

What to look for

See your doctor if you have:

- Swelling in the arm or hand
- Feeling of tightness, heaviness or fullness in the arm or hand (you may notice rings or watches feel tight)
- Feeling of tightness in the skin or a thickening of the skin
- Pain or redness in the arm or hand

When caught early, treatment can reduce some signs and symptoms. It may even stop them from getting worse.

LYMPH AND LYMPH NODES

Lymph is a milky fluid that contains white blood cells. Lymph from tissues and organs drains into lymph vessels that run through the body. These vessels carry the lymph to the lymph nodes where it's filtered. Lymph nodes are found throughout the body. The lymph nodes under the arm (near the breast) are called axillary nodes. These may be biopsied or removed during breast cancer surgery to check for cancer cells.

WHAT IS LYMPHEDEMA?

When axillary nodes are removed or treated with radiation, they can become blocked. This may keep lymph fluid from leaving the area. This can cause swelling known as lymphedema. The fluid can collect in the arm or other areas such as the hand, chest or back causing them to swell.

Lymphedema can occur soon after surgery or many years after treatment.

The most common way to check for lymphedema is to measure upper and lower arm widths. This should be done before surgery for comparison later. Some studies show checking for it within the first 3 months after surgery may lead to earlier diagnosis.

Who's at risk?

Modern surgery removes few axillary nodes. So lymphedema is less common than it used to be. And the cases that occur are less severe in terms of the impact on arm movement and the way the arm looks.

It's not clear why some get lymphedema and others don't. Things that increase risk include:

- Having axillary nodes removed (the more nodes removed, the greater the risk)
- Radiation to the axillary node area
- Having axillary nodes removed plus radiation to the axillary node area
- Having many axillary nodes with cancer
- Infections in the area after surgery
- Being overweight or obese



Image courtesy of Stanley G. Rockson, MD, Allan and Tina Neill Professor of Lymphatic Research and Medicine, Stanford School of Medicine.

For more information, visit komen.org or call Susan G. Komen's breast care helpline at 1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636) Monday through Friday, 9 AM to 10 PM ET.

Resources

Susan G. Komen®
1-877 GO KOMEN
(1-877-465-6636)
komen.org

National Lymphedema Network
1-800-541-3259
lymphnet.org

Lymphatic Education & Research Network
516-625-9675
lymphaticnetwork.org

National Cancer Institute
1-800-4-CANCER
(1-800-442-6237)
cancer.gov

Related educational resources:

- [Lymphedema Video](#)
- [Questions to Ask Your Doctor: Lymphedema](#)
- [Axillary Lymph Nodes](#)
- [Breast Cancer Surgery](#)

Treatments for lymphedema

Most cases of lymphedema can't be cured. Treatment can improve movement and reduce pain and swelling though.

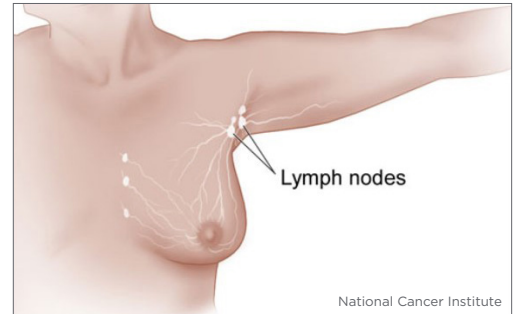
Standard treatment includes complex decongestive therapy. This approach aims to decrease swelling and infection through a mix of:

- Skin and nail care
- Compression bandages or sleeves (these apply pressure around the arm and help push lymph fluid out of the arm)
- Exercises (like closing and opening a fist)
- Manual lymphatic drainage (a special type of massage)
- Physical therapy

Other treatments may include:

- Exercise (such as moderate weightlifting)
- Compression device (a pump connected to a sleeve that inflates and deflates to apply pressure to the arm)
- Surgery
- Weight loss

Before doing any of these, talk with your doctor. You might also want to check your insurance to see if these treatments are covered.



Tips that may reduce your risk

While we don't know how to prevent lymphedema, injury or infection to the arm may trigger it. So try to take steps to reduce your risk. The tips below haven't been proven in studies, but they may work for some people.

- Treat infections of the at-risk arm and hand right away.
- Wear gloves when doing house or garden work.
- Keep skin clean and moisturized.
- Use the opposite arm when having blood drawn, getting injections or having blood pressure taken.
- Avoid sunburn and excess heat from saunas, hot baths, tanning and other sources.
- Don't cut the nail cuticles. Use a cuticle stick to push your cuticles back when they're soft (such as after a bath).
- Use insect spray when outdoors.
- Avoid injuries, scratches and bruises to the at-risk arm.

The list of resources is only a suggested resource and is not a complete listing of breast health and breast cancer materials or information. The information contained herein is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or to replace the services of a medical professional. Komen does not endorse, recommend or make any warranties or representations regarding the accuracy, completeness, timeliness, quality or non-infringement of any of the materials, products or information provided by the organizations referenced herein.