

Lymphedema (Swelling of the arm)

During breast cancer surgery, some of your lymph nodes under your arm may be removed to check for cancer cells. When lymph nodes are removed or treated with radiation therapy, some of the lymph vessels can become blocked. This increases the chance for lymphedema.

Lymphedema can cause painful swelling of the arm or hand on the side of surgery. It usually develops within 3 years of breast surgery. Most cases of lymphedema can't be cured. However, treatment can improve movement and reduce pain and swelling in the affected arm. Also, there are things you can do that may reduce your risk of getting lymphedema.

You may be unsure of what to ask your doctor regarding lymphedema. Here are some questions to help start the conversation.

Q: What are my chances of getting lymphedema?

A:

Q: How do you check for it?

A:

Q: What are the signs of lymphedema? Which ones should I report to you?

A:

Q: Should I avoid specific activities with the arm that had lymph nodes removed? (i.e., blood pressure, blood draws, shots)?

A:

Q: Are there exercises or activities I can do to try to prevent lymphedema? Are there any I should avoid?

A:

Q: Is there anything else I can do to prevent lymphedema?

A:

Q: If I get a cut, burn or insect bite on the affected arm, what should I do?

A:

Q: How is lymphedema treated?

A:

Q: What is a compression sleeve? Should I wear one? Where can I get one? Do I always have to wear it, even at night? What about on an airplane?

A:

Q: How can I care for my skin if I get lymphedema?

A:

Q: What is manual lymph drainage (MLD)? What about complex decongestive therapy? Please explain how these treatments work.

A:



For more information on breast health or breast cancer, please call our breast care helpline (1-877-465-6636) or visit our website. Susan G. Komen does not provide medical advice.

www.komen.org 1-877 GO KOMEN