

## What Is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is the abnormal buildup of lymph fluid in the tissues under the skin. Lymph fluid is a clear, straw-colored watery fluid found throughout the body. Lymph is rich in white blood cells that help to fight infection, and these white blood cells are stored in lymph nodes. The lymph fluid is circulated through our body by lymph vessels.

Damage to the lymphatic system can cause lymphedema. The buildup of lymph fluid can cause swelling or edema. Usually the swelling is in the arm or leg. Less often, it can develop in the breasts, trunk, head, neck or genitals.

There are two types of lymphedema. **Primary Lymphedema** is also called hereditary lymphedema. In primary lymphedema, damage to the lymph vessels is present at birth. In some cases, the swelling may be seen at the time of birth. This is called Milroy's Disease. The swelling from primary lymphedema can also appear later, in the early teenage years, or as an adult.

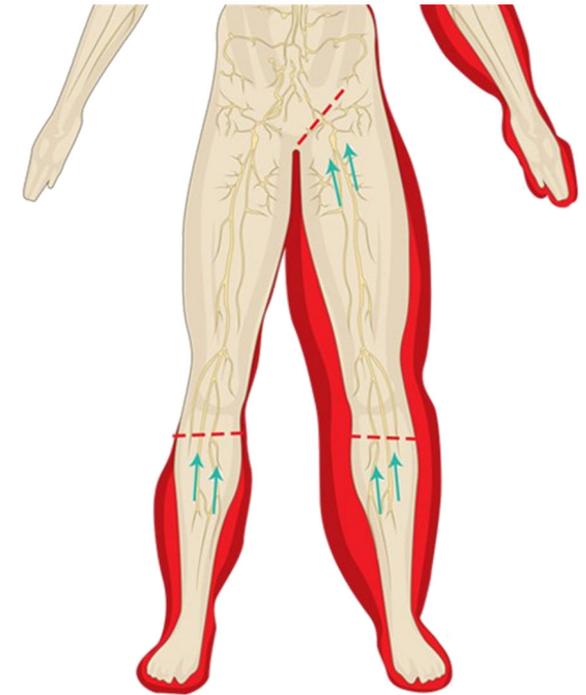
**Secondary Lymphedema** is the second and most common type of lymphedema. Surgery or cancer treatment can damage the lymph system. This puts you "at risk" for developing secondary lymphedema.

The term 'at risk' means that your medical condition has increased the chances of you developing lymphedema in the area where your lymph system was injured; this is often called the affected area.



## LYMPHEDEMA

### What You Need to Know



Lymphedema often begins at the farthest part of the limb (hand/wrist or foot/ankle); however all parts of the affected area are at risk of developing lymphedema.

The risk for developing lymphedema increases with:

- Surgery that removes or damages lymph nodes. The more lymph nodes affected, the higher risk of developing lymphedema.
- Radiation therapy
- Being overweight
- Having active cancer
- Having an infection after surgery

### Signs of Lymphedema

Call your physician's office if you have any of these signs of lymphedema near the area affected by surgery or cancer.

- You have a feeling of fullness or heaviness
- Your skin feels tight
- Your hand, wrist, foot or ankle is less flexible
- Your clothes feel tighter in one specific area
- Your ring, watch, bracelet or shoe feels tighter

### Stages of Lymphedema

There is no way to predict who will get lymphedema or when it will occur. Lymphedema can start within a few months of injury to the lymph system but it can also start much later, even decades later. Most often, lymphedema starts about 1–2 years after the lymph system is injured. Even if the swelling goes away, or if you never have signs, there is always a chance of developing lymphedema.

### Stage O

The lymph system is injured but it still works well enough to manage the flow of lymph. You can't see swelling in Stage o. You may have early signs of numbness, tingling or fullness.

### Stage I

You can see swelling as the lymph fluid begins to collect. The type of swelling is called pitting edema. You can test for pitting edema by pressing a finger firmly against the skin for a few seconds. A dent or pit is left behind on the skin. You may not see swelling in the morning, but it comes back as the day goes on. Swelling typically goes away when you elevate the body part for a while.

### Stage II

Swelling doesn't get better on its own without therapy. The tissues get hard and thick from scar tissue (fibrosis). You are at higher risk for skin problems, including infections (cellulitis).

### Stage III

Swelling makes your arm or leg very big and you may not be able to move the limb easily. The skin may get very hard and scaly. Lymph fluid may leak from breaks in the skin (lymphorrea). You are at a higher risk for recurrent infections and other medical problems related to lymphedema.

### Diagnosis of Lymphedema—

What Next? If you think you have lymphedema, contact your doctor's office right away. Your doctor may order tests to check your lymph system. You may not need any tests if it is clear the cause of swelling is lymphedema. The tests may also check for other causes of swelling like an infection (cellulitis) or blood clot (DVT).

Diagnostic tests may include:

- Doppler ultrasound
- Lymphoscintigraphy
- CT scan
- MRI scan

It is important to treat lymphedema when the signs first appear. If you are diagnosed with lymphedema, get treatment as soon as possible. It can help prevent it from getting worse.

### Treatment

When the swelling is mild, treatment is aimed at helping lymph flow away from the swollen area. Compression garments, exercise, and elevation are used to help lymph flow. This is usually effective in Stage o and Stage 1 lymphedema.

If swelling gets worse, your plan may include these four treatments. When used together, they are called Complete Decongestive Therapy or CDT. It is the plan often used by a CLT.

1. **Manual Lymph Drainage (MLD):** a gentle massage technique that stimulates the lymph vessels to move fluid from the affected area.
2. **Compression Therapy:** a multilayer bandaging approach that helps move the lymph fluid out of the affected area. Once there is improvement, wearing a compression garment will help prevent further swelling.
3. **Good Skin and Nail Care.** This may prevent infection. A podiatrist can provide expert foot care.
4. **Exercise and Movement.** Both help your circulation and move lymph fluid which improves lymphatic drainage.