

# HOW TO MANAGE YOUR LYMPHEDEMA



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# Overview

Lymphedema is swelling in parts of your body, generally in your arms, legs, but may also affect your trunk and face. It can happen as a result of your cancer or the effects from your cancer treatments. Having lymphedema can be troubling for many, as it can affect you physically and emotionally. The changes in how your limb looks and feels can be difficult for many.

If you are at risk of developing lymphedema, monitor your limb closely with daily massages and visual checking. Avoid any trauma and injury to the limb by reading the Dos and Don'ts in this leaflet. If you have been assessed to have lymphedema, treatment should begin as soon as possible. This process will include manual lymphatic drainage, compression therapy, exercise and good skin care. You may be fitted with a compression garment after which it is crucial that you continue caring for your limb to prevent worsening of lymphedema.

The key to better outcomes of lymphedema is ensuring early intervention for lymphedema. This means diligent care of your affected limb as instructed by your lymphedema therapist. Speak to your family or friends to help you with heavier tasks. A social support group is useful so that you know that you are not alone.



# How To Manage Your Lymphedema

## WRITE HERE:





Stage of Lymphedema:

Activities that could worsen your lymphedema:

Strategies tried so far:

Strategies not tried yet:



<b>Stage 0</b>	<b>Stage 1</b>	<b>Stage 2</b>	<b>Stage 3</b>
			
No obvious swelling	Mild Swelling	Moderate Swelling	Severe Swelling

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lymphedema>



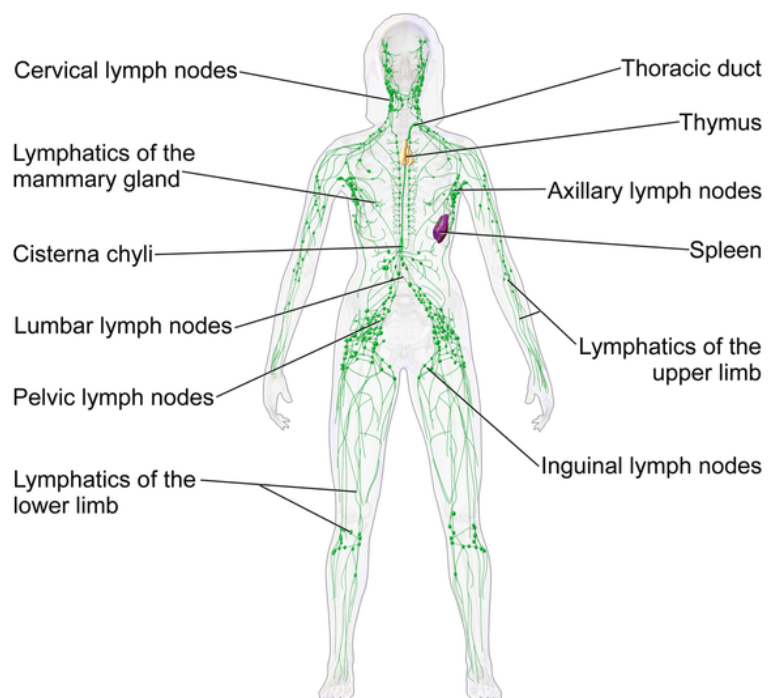
# Lymphedema

## Definition of Lymphedema

Lymphedema is a condition in which protein rich fluid accumulates just under the skin causing swelling. It usually affects your limb (i.e. arm or/ and leg) but it may also affect other body parts such as breast, trunk and head and neck. This is caused by a compromised lymphatic system.

## The Lymphatic System

Lymphatic system is a large network consisting of lymph nodes, lymph vessels and capillaries. This network is situated in several areas of your body, with a specific drainage pathway for each area. Your lymphatic system is a one way transport system, which first absorbs fluid and large molecules (like proteins) from the body



Source: Blausen.com staff (2014). "Medical gallery of Blausen Medical 2014". WikiJournal of Medicine

and then brings them back to the venous system. The lymph nodes act as 'filtering stations' trapping foreign bodies, bacteria and viruses, which will later be destroyed by the body's immune cells.

## Causes of Lymphedema

Lymphedema is a potential side effect of cancer surgery and radiation therapy. However in some cases, it can appear months or even years after treatment ends. Lymphedema usually develops when lymph nodes are removed or lymph vessels are damaged by:

- Surgical removal of lymph nodes during cancer treatment
- Radiotherapy which may damage surrounding lymph nodes and /or lymph vessels
- The cancer tumour blocking the lymph flow

## Onset of Lymphedema

Lymphedema may happen months or years after your cancer treatment, but it is important to note that the risk remains over your lifetime and it increases with trauma or injury to your affected limb.



## Risk Factors

Some lymphedema risk factors are within your control and others are not.

### Factors not within your control

- Extensive or multiple surgeries
- Number of lymph nodes removed: More lymph nodes being removed increase the risk of developing lymphedema.
- Radiotherapy

### Factors within your control

- Obesity
- Infection or injury to the affected limb

## Symptoms of Lymphedema

Lymphedema usually develops gradually. You may notice the following even before a noticeable swelling is present:

- A feeling of achiness, tingling, discomfort, or increased warmth in the affected region/ limb
- A feeling of heaviness in the affected region/limb
- “Bursting” or “shooting” pain sensations or pins and needles in the affected region/limb
- Clothes or jewellery (rings, watches etc.) that fit well before, but now feel tighter, do not fit, or leave an indentation on the skin
- Veins or tendons in the limb look less obvious, or once-wrinkled skin looks younger or smoother

### Lymphedema

- Spaces between knuckles on left hand are puffy
- No tendons visible
- Note shiny appearance of swelling. Fewer wrinkles at wrist area



### Normal

- Knuckles, tendons, blood vessels are visible
- Skin wrinkles are more obvious
- Skin is easily moved or pinched.



Source: [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Cellulitis-in-right-arm-of-patient-with-lymphedema\\_fig1\\_260372113](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Cellulitis-in-right-arm-of-patient-with-lymphedema_fig1_260372113)

## Lymphedema may lead to certain complications

- Changes in skin texture or appearance, such as tightness, redness, or hardening
- Decreased flexibility in nearby joints which may lead to restricted range of motion. e.g. shoulder, elbow or wrist
- Skin infection (or cellulitis) which may cause rashes, itching, redness, pain, or warm sensation of the skin, along with fever or flu-like symptoms



Source: <https://lymph-what-oedema.com/cellulitis>

*Occasionally lymphedema may manifest as sudden severe swelling, i.e. your limb seems to "blow up" to a larger size within a day or two. This could be an onset of an infection, a blood clot (known as Deep Vein Thrombosis) or a recurrence of the cancer that is affecting the lymphatic system. It is important to seek medical attention immediately.*

## Strategies to Manage Lymphedema

You may follow the Dos and Don'ts listed on the next page in order to prevent lymphedema from developing or getting worse:



## Things To Do



### 1) Protect your skin

- Moisturize your skin frequently and regularly to make sure that your skin is supple to prevent it from cracking.
- Keep your arm or leg clean using non alcohol-based soaps.
- Clean and dry thoroughly between toes, fingers or skin folds to avoid any fungal infections.
- Consult your doctor if any fungal infection develops.
- Use insect repellents, preferably brands with no alcohol content.
- Apply antibiotic ointment to insect bites, cuts, scratches or torn cuticles, if any.
- Always consult a doctor if unsure.
- Protect your arm from sunburn with sunscreen.

### 2) Position your limb

- Rest your arm in an elevated position.
- Elevate your legs as often as you can during the day if your lower limb is affected.



## Things To Do



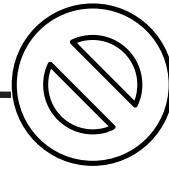
### 3) Be careful when you perform your daily activities

- Monitor your blood sugar carefully if you have diabetes to minimize the danger of open wounds and infection.
- Clip your nails with nail clippers. Consider bringing your own tools to the saloon if you are getting a professional manicure service.
- Use rubber gloves when doing household tasks or gardening to avoid cuts or excessive drying.
- Wear oven mitts when handling hot foods.
- Use a thimble when you sew.
- Use an electric razor instead of a safety razor.
- Take more frequent rest breaks when scrubbing, mopping, cleaning, or while doing other vigorous or repetitive activities, especially if your arm feels tired, heavy, or achy.
- Movement is encouraged (e.g. walking) if your work requires prolonged sitting.
- If you are taking a plane, move your affected limb regularly or perform simple range of motion exercises. You may choose to wear a compression sleeve or stocking. Speak to your therapist to find out more.

### 4) Stay healthy

- Take good care of your general health. Avoid smoking and excessive drinking.
- Maintain a healthy body weight by adopting a balanced diet and regular exercise. Obesity has been associated with a significantly increased risk of developing lymphedema.

## Don'ts



### 1) Avoid being near to hot environment

- Don't take unusually hot baths or showers.
- Don't go from extreme hot to cold water temperatures when you bathe or wash dishes.
- Don't go into high-heat hot tubs, saunas, or steam baths.
- Don't apply heating pads or hot compresses on or near the affected or at risk area.

### 2) Avoid over-exerting your affected limb

- Don't carry heavy objects for prolonged periods of time with your affected arm, especially with the arm hanging downward.
- Don't carry heavy shoulder bags on the affected side.

### 3) Avoid putting your skin at risk of injury

- Don't wear clothing that has tight sleeves or that restrains movement.
- Don't wear watches or other jewellery that are too tight on your affected hand or arm.
- Don't get manicures that cut or overstress the skin around the nails.
- Don't perform blood pressure testing on your at-risk arm
- Don't allow the skin of your affected arm to be pierced. For example: during injections, drawing blood or vaccinations.

## Complete Decongestive Therapy

Complete decongestive therapy (CDT) is considered the gold standard in lymphedema management.

It consists of the following 4 aspects:

1. Skin care
2. Manual lymphatic drainage
3. Compression therapy
4. Exercise



Source: [https://www.nortonschool.com/cdt\\_course\\_tour/section\\_04/03.html](https://www.nortonschool.com/cdt_course_tour/section_04/03.html)

### Skin care

- This involves taking good care of your skin to prevent the risk of cellulitis by following the Dos and Don'ts listed in the previous page.

### Manual lymphatic drainage

- This is a rhythmic massage done by a certified lymphedema therapist.
- It uses light pressure with the aim to redirect or facilitate the lymph flow from the affected limb or area towards functioning lymph system.
- As part of your daily self care regime, your therapist may teach you a simplified version to perform at home.

## Compression Therapy

- Compression therapy is an important part of lymphedema management. It aims to reduce swelling as well as prevent the swelling from getting worse.
- Compression therapy uses:

### 1) Multilayer bandaging

During active phase of lymphedema reduction



### 2) Compression garments

During maintenance phase



## Exercise

Exercise has been shown to reduce the risk of developing lymphedema by strengthening the action of the muscle pumps. Your therapist will teach you some exercises to be performed regularly at home, such as deep breathing exercises and gentle range of motion exercises with or without weights. It is recommended to perform exercises with the compression bandages or garment on. In order to engage in exercises safely, it is recommended to:

- Start slowly and progress gradually.
- Monitor for any worsening of symptoms such as pain, tightness and heaviness. Report back to your therapist immediately if any.



## Returning to Work

Managing lymphedema when you are at work may be challenging, but this can be overcome with your skills and confidence in managing your lymphedema. Some jobs may not be ideal due to work demands which may worsen your lymphedema.



### Some of these work demands include:

- Heavy physical work
- Heavy lifting or physical strain
- Increased danger of injury, e.g. sharps
- Near heated environment

### Potential barriers in your work include:

- Restricted mobility or function of your limb
- Poorer body image as a result of wearing compression garment or increased limb size
- Stigmatization
- Emotional stress due to job security or worries

Consult your therapist if your job may require any modifications. Your therapist may advise you more about lymphedema management strategies. Discuss with your supervisor or human resource officer to consider adjusting your job scope and workload if you are at a risk of worsening your lymphedema symptoms.

**NOTES:**





**SINGAPORE  
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SOCIETY**

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REHABILITATION CENTRE

*Celebrating Recovery*

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Singapore 608550

Email: [rehab@singaporecancersociety.org.sg](mailto:rehab@singaporecancersociety.org.sg)

[www.singaporecancersociety.org.sg](http://www.singaporecancersociety.org.sg)

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