

What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is the accumulation of lymphatic fluid that can cause swelling in the arm and/or hand. Lymphatic fluid is normally filtered through the lymph nodes. Removal of lymph nodes requires lymph fluids from the arm to be rerouted and filtered through remaining axillary lymph nodes. Lymphedema occurs in a small number of patients, and symptoms can range from hand swelling alone to total arm swelling. Should you notice any swelling, please contact your surgeon's office who will instruct you in appropriate follow up care. Intervention includes physical or occupational therapy, manual lymphatic drainage, compression bandaging and garments. New research suggests gradual, progressive strengthening, when cleared by your physician, can actually minimize the risk of lymphedema by dilating, or widening, remaining lymphatic channels around the shoulder and arm.

Who is at risk for lymphedema?

With a sentinel node biopsy, the lifetime risk of lymphedema is up to 3%. With an axillary dissection or radiation to the axilla, the lifetime risk is up to 15%. The vast majority of cases of lymphedema related to breast surgery or radiation occur in the first year after treatment. Being overweight can increase your risk.

What are the early signs of lymphedema?

The early sign of lymphedema is swelling of the arm or hand. Sometimes the arm will feel heavy. Sometimes the first sign is that your sleeve or jewelry feels tighter than usual.

Guidelines for Lymphedema Risk Reduction for After *Axillary Node Dissection*:

- Have blood pressure checked in the unaffected arm.
- Avoid injections and blood draws in the affected arm.
- Keep arm clean and dry, use daily moisturizer.
- Wear gloves while doing activities that might cause skin injury, such as gardening, working with tools, and using chemicals such as detergents.
- Avoid tight jewelry, tight clothing, or elastic bands around the affected arm or fingers.
- Protect arm from sun and insects by using sunscreen and insect repellent.
- If you get a scratch, bite, burn, or break in your skin, wash the affected area immediately with soap and water, and apply antibiotic ointment.
- Report any redness or warmth right away. Treating infection promptly will minimize your risk.
- After surgery or radiation, return to your normal activities gradually. Be careful when lifting heavy objects. Start with 2-3 pounds and see how your body reacts.
- Avoid repetitive motions with the affected arm such as vacuuming for 2 weeks after surgery.

There are physical and occupational therapists who specialize in lymphedema care. Your doctor or nurse practitioner will give you a referral if needed. You may also have a pre-operative meeting with a therapist if you are interested in learning more about lymphedema care.