

What is LYMPHEDEMA?

Lymphedema is a chronic condition that impacts a number of cancer patients, especially those who have lymph nodes removed or damaged as part of their treatment. The condition is most commonly associated with breast cancer patients but can result from the treatment for other cancers. While lymphedema can be painful, even debilitating, the condition can be managed, prevented and, in some cases, reversed.

SYMPTOMS

The most common signs of lymphedema include:

Pain, heat and/or redness in the affected area

Persistent depressions in the skin when pressed

A feeling of tightness or stiffness in the skin

Swelling, most often in the arms, hands, fingers, shoulders, chest or legs

Decreased movement or flexibility in the hand, wrist or ankle

Aching in the neck, shoulders, spine or hips

Untreated lymphedema can lead to decreased function and mobility in the affected area, skin breakdown, infection and other complications.

Tight-fitting ring, watch, clothes or shoes

A weakness or heavy feeling in the arms or legs

PREVENTION & TREATMENT



If a cancer patient is deemed at risk for lymphedema, a number of options may be recommended to keep the condition at bay, including:

- A sentinel lymph node biopsy prior to surgery to identify lymph nodes for removal, while helping to preserve remaining lymph nodes
- Gentle range-of-motion exercises, massage, skin care, light exercises and education techniques to stimulate the lymphatic system
- Compression bandages, pumps or garments (e.g. sleeves, stockings) to help prevent additional fluid from accumulating in the tissue

SURGICAL OPTIONS



After non-surgical therapeutic approaches have been exhausted, two state-of-the-art surgical options may also be available to treat lymphedema.

- **Vascularized lymph node transfer surgery:** This is an intricate microsurgical procedure used to treat patients with advanced lymphedema affecting the skin tissue in the arms or legs.

Plastic surgeons transfer working lymph nodes from another part of the body, typically the upper groin or lower abdomen, to the damaged site. The existing blood vessels supplying the nodes are then divided and connected at the site the lymph nodes are needed. Reverse lymphatic mapping is used to reduce the chance of lymphedema occurring in the areas where lymph nodes were harvested.

- **Lymphaticovenular bypass surgery:** This is an intricate super-microsurgical procedure used to treat patients with mild to moderate lymphedema. The plastic surgeons perform the surgery by locating damaged lymphatic vessels directly beneath the skin in the affected area of the body. Then the surgeons redirect, or shunt, fluid from damaged lymphatic vessels to neighboring tiny veins called “venules”, by connecting the working segments of the lymphatic vessels to the venules to allow excess fluid to drain into the bloodstream and reduce pressure in the affected area.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

[Visitcancercenter.com/treatments/lymphedema-management](https://www.visitcancercenter.com/treatments/lymphedema-management) or call (800) 333-CTCA.