Intermountain® Healthcare

Lymphedema

What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is abnormal swelling in an area on one side of your body, usually an arm or a leg. It is caused by a problem with your **lymphatic system**.

- **How does the lymphatic system work?** The lymphatic system is a network of vessels and nodes that collect and carry extra fluid, wastes and proteins from your body's tissues. A healthy lymphatic system prevents swelling, filters wastes, and maintains healthy tissue.
- **What happens with lymphedema?** If the lymph vessels or nodes are damaged or overworked, the fluid doesn't flow normally. It starts to build up in your tissues, and protein in the fluid attracts more swelling. Over time, the swelling affects your skin and increases your risk for skin infections.

What are the symptoms?

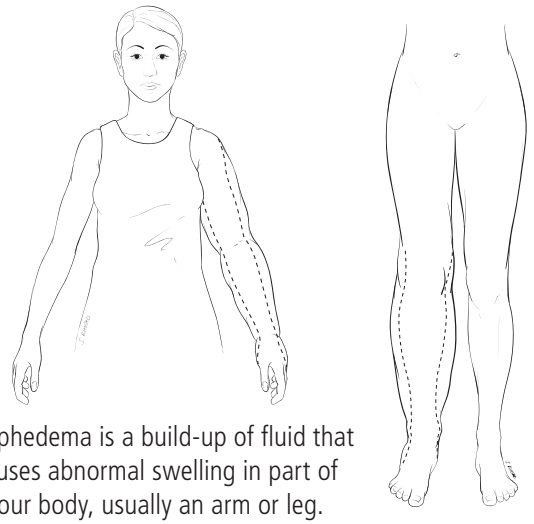
Symptoms of lymphedema include:

- Full or heavy feeling in an arm or leg
- Skin that feels tight or hard on the arm or leg
- Stiff joints nearby, such as in the shoulder, wrist, hand, ankle, or foot
- Difficulty fitting into clothes in one specific area, such as a sleeve or a sock
- Tight feeling rings, watches, or bracelets, even if you haven't gained weight
- Swelling that doesn't get better even if you elevate the area or take diuretics ("water pills")

Your lymphedema therapist

Name: _____

Phone number: _____



Lymphedema is a build-up of fluid that causes abnormal swelling in part of your body, usually an arm or leg.

Who is at risk for lymphedema?

Lymphedema can develop as a result of surgery, radiation, infection, or trauma. The most common causes of lymphedema include:

- Family history of lymphedema
- Removal of lymph nodes or treatment with radiation as part of cancer treatment
- Recurrent cellulitis, a bacterial skin infection
- Long-term problems with circulation in the veins

How is lymphedema treated?

Treatments for lymphedema include:

- **Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD)**, a special type of massage that mimics the pumping of lymph fluid through the body.
- **Skin care** (see the next page).
- **Exercises specific to your condition** (for general tips, see the next page).
- **Specialized compression bandages or garments.** When fitted properly, these can put pressure on the affected area in a way that will help your circulation.

How can I protect my skin and prevent infection?

A skin infection or wound can make lymphedema worse. Follow these tips to protect your skin:

- **Keep your skin clean and dry,** and use a moisturizer every day.
- **Avoid burns.** Use sunscreen to avoid sunburn. When cooking, use oven mitts or hot pads.
- **Avoid any skin injury, even a minor one.**
  - Prevent bug bites by using insect repellent.
  - Wear shoes. Wear gloves while gardening, using tools, or using chemicals such as detergents.
  - Avoid having an injection, an intravenous (IV) line or a blood draw in the affected arm or leg.
  - Avoid cuts from grooming. If you use a razor, consider using an electric one. Don't cut the cuticles when manicuring your nails.
- **Avoid extreme cold or heat.** Protect your skin if you're out in the cold. Avoid heating pads, saunas, and water over 102° F, such as in hot tubs.
- **Avoid too much pressure on the affected area.**
  - Don't wear tight stockings, shoes or elastic bands around an affected leg. Don't wear tight jewelry, tight clothing or elastic bands around an affected arm or finger.
  - Don't have blood pressure taken in the affected arm or leg.
  - Don't cross your legs when sitting.
  - Make sure compression garments, such as a sleeve or stocking, fit you well. If you're not sure, ask your healthcare providers.
- **If you get a cut, scratch, bite, burn or any break in your skin,** wash it right away with soap and water. Cover it with a bandage, if necessary. Check for normal healing at least once a day.

How can I lower my risk of swelling?

- **Elevate the affected area.** In the early stages of lymphedema, it can help to prop up the affected limb when sitting.
- **Be active.** Physical activity can help the circulation in your lymph system. Avoid standing or sitting in one place for a long time. Walking, biking, swimming, or dancing are good choices. Follow these tips:
  - Check with your healthcare provider before starting an exercise program.
  - Begin slowly, and gradually increase the length or the intensity of exercise. Rest often.
  - Aim to exercise 20 minutes, 4 days a week.
  - If you have a compression garment (stocking or sleeve), wear it while exercising.
  - Exercise when the weather is cooler. Heat and humidity can increase swelling.
  - Use the affected limb as normally as possible during the day. For example, use the affected arm when dressing or brushing your hair.
- **Be careful when lifting heavy objects.** Avoid repetitive lifting.
- **Use your compression garment.** Wear your compression sleeve or stocking as directed, especially during exercise or travel.
- **Watch for symptoms.** Regularly check the affected area for any changes in size, shape, tissue texture, soreness, heaviness or firmness.

When should I call my healthcare provider?

Call your healthcare provider if:

- Your affected limb is seriously injured
- You see signs of infection, which include:
  - Pain
  - Warmth
  - Increased swelling

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