



Lymphedema: Reduce Your Risk

Lymphedema is a chronic condition that cannot be cured but can be managed. Damage to the lymphatic system causes a buildup of lymph fluid that leads to swelling, most often in the hands/arms, feet/legs or trunk of the body.

Secondary lymphedema can develop after surgery, radiation, trauma or infection that damages the lymphatic system. In Canada, the leading causes are lymph node removal and radiation therapy for some cancers (including breast, ovarian, colon, prostate and others).

If you have had lymph nodes or vessels damaged or removed, you have a lifelong risk for lymphedema. The earlier lymphedema is detected, the easier it is to treat and manage. Know how to reduce your risk and watch out for early signs.

Early Signs of Lymphedema

- A new feeling of tightness in the skin.
- A new sense of fullness, heaviness or discomfort in an arm, leg or other area.
- Clothing or jewellery feeling tighter than usual on an arm, leg or other area.
- A new onset of numbness or tingling.
- Visible swelling (you may have some or all of the other signs without any swelling).

Tips to Reduce Your Risk

- **Protect Your Skin** Your skin is a natural barrier to infection. A break in the skin can lead to infection and put stress on the lymphatic system. Use caution when shaving, especially if you have reduced feeling in the armpit or groin. Protect skin from insect bites, scratches and harsh chemicals. Apply sunscreen to prevent burning. Wear gloves when washing dishes to prevent dry skin.
- **Moisturize** Your skin is part of your lymphatic system. Wash and dry your skin well. Use a moisturiser daily to prevent skin dryness and cracking.
- **Avoid Constriction** Tight clothing/jewellery or a heavy bag can reduce lymph flow.
- **Avoid Temperature Extremes** Too much heat (hot tubs, saunas and very hot showers) or cold can increase lymph buildup or cause swelling.
- **Exercise at a Moderate Pace** Slowly build up your pace with regular exercise. Don't do too much too quickly. Avoid sudden or extreme activities.
- **Maintain a Healthy Weight** Healthy eating and regular exercise help. You may also wish to speak to a doctor about what a healthy weight means for you.
- **Medical Considerations** If possible, have bloodwork, injections and blood pressure monitoring on the other side from where your cancer was treated (and your lymphatic system may be damaged).
- **Watch out for early signs** of lymphedema and speak to a doctor if you notice a change.
- **Consult a Lymphedema Therapist** for more information and advice on how to reduce your risk and monitor for early signs of lymphedema, including baseline measurements. Call Haley Rehab at 613-422-5061 today, to book your initial consultation.