

# LYMPHEDEMA

## Introduction for People with Breast Cancer

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**Waterloo Wellington  
Regional Cancer Program**

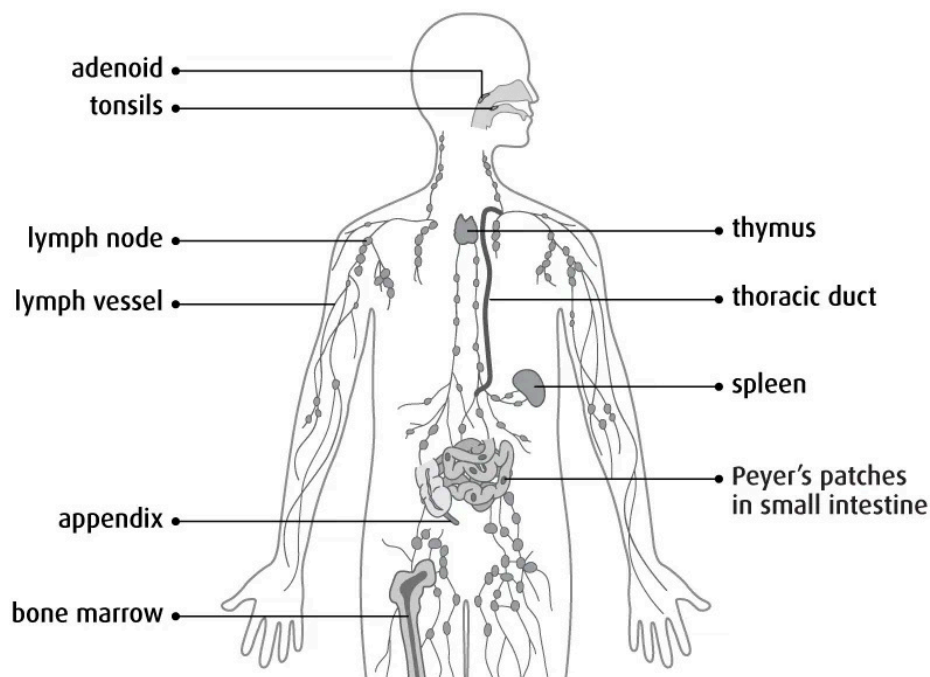
Ontario Health (Cancer Care Ontario)

# The Lymphatic System

The lymphatic system plays a large role in immune function and circulation. It is a network of vessels, nodes, and that:

- Collect extra fluid, wastes, and proteins from other tissue spaces to prevent swelling
- Filter wastes
- Maintains healthy tissue

## The Lymphatic System



Overview of key parts of the Lymphatic System from the Canadian Cancer Society.

## What is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is an abnormal swelling of a body part. The lymph vessels that carry the fluid are damaged, removed, and/or overwhelmed. This leads to the build-up of fluid, proteins, and wastes in your tissue.

Lymphedema is a life-long (chronic) condition. It cannot be cured, but if found early enough it can be well managed.

# Are You at Risk?

Breast cancer patients are at a higher risk for lymphedema. As many as 1 in 4 breast cancer survivors will experience lymphedema in their lifetime. The risk of getting lymphedema in your lifetime goes up if you have had more than 1 of these treatments:

- Surgery
- Lymph node removal
- Radiation

It's hard to predict when you might develop lymphedema. It can present itself shortly after surgery or not until years later. Most people will show signs within the first 3 years of treatment.

## Lower Your Risk of Lymphedema

You have a lifelong risk of developing lymphedema. You can make changes to your daily activities to help lower your risk. The following guidelines can help you be proactive:

- Maintain a healthy skin barrier. You can use gentle, unscented, and hypoallergenic care products like:
  - soaps
  - lotions
  - sunscreens
  - insect repellent
- Attend to any areas of open skin (like a cut). Keep it clean using soap, water, and an over the counter topical antibiotic cream/ointment such as Polysporin™ . Watch for signs of infection (like redness, pain and/or swelling).
- Try wearing a compression garment. A lymphedema therapist can assess if you would benefit from wearing a compression garment.
- Avoid letting your skin dry out or stay wet for long periods of time.
  - Wear gloves when you garden or wash dishes
- Use an electric razor to avoid cuts or razor burn when shaving like the armpit or groin.
- Practice deep breathing daily.
- Avoid spending a long time in heat (like hot tubs or saunas) for over 15 minutes.

- Eat well and stay active
  - Exercise daily. This can include stretching, strength, or cardio exercises. Start slow and up the intensity and time of exercise sessions over time. Aim for 150 minutes or more each week.
  - Monitor hand/arm during and after activity and exercise for any change in size, shape, soreness, heaviness or firmness. Make sure you are listening to your body and not over doing any activities.
  - Eat a balanced diet. This can help you maintain a healthy weight.

## Early Signs of Lymphedema

- Heaviness
- Tightness/tension
- Tight fitting clothes/jewellery
- Discomfort or “pins and needles”
- Aching/pain
- Bursting sensation
- Puffiness/swelling
- Reduced limb movement



Image showing the right arm with signs of lymphedema.

## Risk of Infection

Your risk of getting an infection is higher when you have lymphedema. Do not ignore the signs and symptoms below. **Call your healthcare team right away if you have these signs or symptoms.**

- Redness
- Warmth
- Pain
- Fever/chills
- Swelling

# How is Lymphedema Treated?

Lymphedema can be treated by combined decongestive therapy (CDT). CDT is done by professionals called Certified Lymphedema Therapists (CLTs). They can help you treat and manage lymphedema the following ways:

## Manual Lymph Drainage

A rhythmical, light massage.

## Compression Therapy

Compression bandages or special compression garments are used to help decrease swelling and prevent further accumulations.

## Skin Care

Properly moisturized and intact skin helps to prevent infection.

## Exercise

Exercise promotes lymphatic functioning. The golden rule is to not over-do it and listen to your body. Discuss your exercise plan with your therapist. In order to properly treat Lymphedema, it is important to seek out a therapist that has training in combined decongestive therapy (CDT).

# Find a Certified Lymphedema Therapist

Certified lymphedema therapists are health professionals (like nurses or doctors) or allied health professionals (like physiotherapists, occupational therapists, or registered massage therapists) who have additional certifications to specialize in lymphedema care.

The Lymphedema Association of Ontario has a searchable online and hard copy directory of certified lymphedema therapists.

Visit their website to search online:

[www.lymphontario.ca/directory](http://www.lymphontario.ca/directory)



Or contact the Patient and Family Resource Centre on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor of WRHN Cancer Centre for a printed directory.



**519-749-4380 extension 2080**



**info@jwesleygrahamrc.ca**

# Resources

Visit the **J. Wesley Graham Patient & Family Resource Centre** to get a printed copy of resources. Volunteers can help you find and access credible cancer information.

You can also scan the QR Code or click the blue links below to learn more online.



Lymphedema Association of Ontario



Assisted Devices Program



Ontario Health atHome



HopeSpring



Patient & Family Resource Centre



Lymphatic Self Massage

**Lymphedema Association of Ontario:** [lymphontario.ca](http://lymphontario.ca)

**Assisted Devices Program:** [ontario.ca/page/breast-prostheses-and-artificial-limbs](http://ontario.ca/page/breast-prostheses-and-artificial-limbs)

**Ontario Home atHome:** [ontariohealthathome.ca](http://ontariohealthathome.ca)

**HopeSpring Cancer Support Centre:** [hopespring.ca](http://hopespring.ca)

**Patient & Family Resource Centre:** [wrhn.ca/wwrcp/support/patient-family-resource-centre](http://wrhn.ca/wwrcp/support/patient-family-resource-centre)

**Lymphatic Self Massage:**

[uhn.ca/PrincessMargaret/PatientsFamilies/Specialized\\_Program\\_Services/Pages/lymphatic\\_self\\_massage.aspx](http://uhn.ca/PrincessMargaret/PatientsFamilies/Specialized_Program_Services/Pages/lymphatic_self_massage.aspx)

Use this resource for your information only. It does not replace medical advice from your doctor or other healthcare professionals.



cancerpatiented@wrhn.ca



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