



# Lymphedema Disease

## What Is Lymphedema?

**Lymphedema** is a common cause of leg or arm swelling due to fluid collecting in those areas. The swelling is usually not painful, but it may cause a heavy, aching discomfort. It can limit a person's ability to use their arms or legs. Lymphedema is a treatable chronic condition. While there is no known cure, most people who receive treatment can live active, healthy lives.

## Causes

The **lymph vessels** are a type of blood vessel that carries fluid from tissues and organs back to the veins. Many things can damage the lymph vessels and cause lymphedema:

- Cancer
- Treatment for breast cancer
- Surgery or radiation therapy
- Infections

In some cases, lymphedema is a genetic condition that is present at birth or develops during the early years of life or puberty.

## Symptoms

Signs of lymphedema are:

- Severe swelling of one or both arms or legs
- Heaviness of arms and legs (due to swelling)
- Inability to fully use or rotate arms or legs
- Frequent infections
- Swelling of fingers and toes
- **Pitting edema.** This occurs when a swollen part of the body has a dimple or pit after pressing down on the skin for a few seconds.

## Risk Factors

The most common cause of lymphedema is damage to or removal of lymph nodes as part of cancer treatment.

Other risk factors include:

- Older age
- Excessive weight
- Rheumatoid or psoriatic arthritis
- Major trauma or burns
- A family history of lymphedema

- **Lymphatic filariasis.** This is a disease caused by exposure to a parasite, typically spread by a mosquito, that infects the lymph nodes and lymph vessels.

## Diagnosis

Lymphedema is generally diagnosed based on symptoms, medical history, and risk factors. Your health care provider should make sure your limb swelling isn't related to other medical problems, such as congestive heart failure or **deep vein thrombosis** (blood clots in the legs).

If the cause of lymphedema isn't obvious, a health care provider may perform some of the following tests:

- **Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan:** This machine uses magnetic fields to produce a 3D high resolution image of the affected area.
- **Computed tomography (CT) scan:** This takes X-ray-like images of different sections of your body to look for blockages in the lymphatic system.
- **Doppler ultrasound:** This exam uses high-frequency sound waves to locate obstructions in the lymph nodes.

For more information, review this related flyer:

- Focus on Compression Therapy

