

# LYMPHOEDEMA AFTER BREAST CANCER

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## **Anyone who has had breast cancer surgery or surgery combined with radiation therapy may be at risk of developing lymphoedema.**

This uncomfortable swelling can occur in the arm, hand or breast /chest area and can happen in the months following treatment or sometimes years later. It may be triggered by infection or injury to the arm or may sometimes occur without obvious cause.

It's important to know the signs of lymphoedema and show any unusual swelling to your doctor even if you were treated for breast cancer years ago.

Early diagnosis and treatment of lymphoedema can help lessen its severity. This is a condition that can worsen over time and is difficult to treat so early referral to a lymphoedema therapist is vital.



For more information visit  
[www.nzbcf.org.nz](http://www.nzbcf.org.nz)

LYMPHOEDEMA AFTER BREAST CANCER

**1** What is Lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is a swelling caused by a build-up of lymph fluid. This happens when the lymphatic drainage system is not working well. The lymphatic system may not have developed properly or may have been damaged as a result of surgery and/or radiation therapy.

When there is more fluid in the tissues than the lymphatic vessels can remove, swelling develops.

The lymphatic system is a network of tiny channels which transport lymph fluid throughout the body. This fluid contains protein, water, bacteria and waste products not required by the body.

Small, bean-shaped lymph nodes (glands) situated in the neck, armpits, chest, abdomen, groin and limbs have a role in triggering immunity (the body's defence) but they also filter and cleanse the lymph fluid, removing substances that may be harmful to the body. Lymph fluid is then returned to the blood circulation via large veins and collection ducts.

During breast cancer surgery, one, several, or all of the lymph nodes under the arm may need to be removed to check whether any cancer cells are present.

A sentinel node biopsy usually removes only one to four lymph nodes and the risk of lymphoedema after this is quite low (approximately 6%).

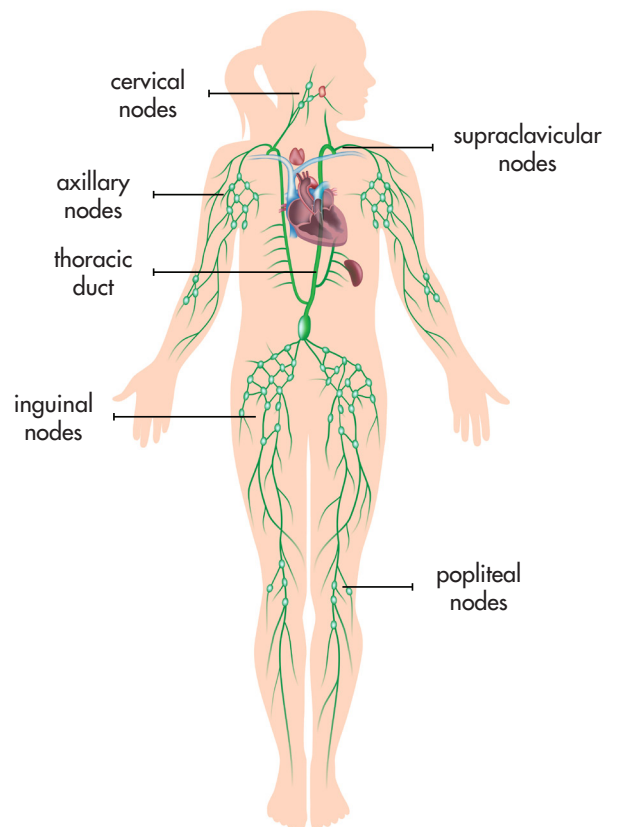
Axillary node dissection removes more nodes and this may raise the lymphoedema risk to 20%, especially when the axilla is also treated with radiation therapy. If mild swelling is treated early, the risk of progressing to severe lymphoedema is very low.

Swelling may develop in the arm or chest area immediately after breast cancer surgery. This is usually a natural part of the healing process, rather than lymphoedema, and should return to normal within a short time (8-12 weeks). However swelling should always be checked by the team caring for you.

It's not known why some people develop lymphoedema and others don't, so it's important to take care of your arm and be aware of the risk.

If swelling develops in your arm, hand or breast/chest area during, or at any time after your breast cancer treatment, seek advice from your breastcare nurse or another member of your specialist team as soon as possible.

**!**  
Muscular movement, including deep breathing, helps to keep the lymph fluid moving.



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### 2 Risk factors

- ❖ Surgery with removal of lymph nodes from the axilla (armpit) particularly if you have had extensive breast or lymph node surgery. The risk is low after sentinel node biopsy alone.
- ❖ Radiation therapy to the breast, or to the axillary, internal mammary or supraclavicular lymph nodes (near the collar-bone). Scar formation, fibrosis and dermatitis following post-operative radiation therapy.

Following breast cancer treatments these factors further increase the risk of lymphoedema:

- ❖ Excess weight or obesity.
- ❖ An inactive lifestyle.
- ❖ Cording. String-like structures may develop under the skin of the upper arm or axilla following lymph node surgery. This is also called axillary web syndrome. Seek advice about preventing lymphoedema if this occurs.
- ❖ Chronic skin disorders and inflammation. These increase the risk of infection.
- ❖ Air travel, particularly long flights. Inactivity during long car or train trips.
- ❖ Injury or trauma to the at-risk arm.

### 3 Possible signs of lymphoedema

In its early stage, lymphoedema may not cause any obvious problems. A slight swelling may develop with "pitting" of the tissues. This is seen after pressure is applied to a small area and an indentation remains after the pressure is released. The swelling may come and go. It often disappears overnight then worsens as the day goes on. A prompt referral to a lymphoedema therapist is vital at this stage. Lymphatic massage and a properly measured and fitted compression garment can be used to reduce the swelling.

An elastic bandage from the pharmacy is not effective and should not be used.

If left untreated, the swelling eventually becomes permanent; it doesn't lessen overnight and there is no longer any pitting as the area begins to feel increasingly hard. This is due to the build-up of protein/fat as well as fluid in the tissues.

When this protein-rich fluid becomes trapped in the tissues it interferes with wound healing and increases the risk of infection. If your arm or breast becomes red, hot and painful, contact your doctor as soon as possible, as you may have cellulitis (an infection that needs *immediate* treatment with antibiotics). If your own GP is unavailable seek medical attention elsewhere.

**Some early warning signs may be present for months or years before permanent swelling is noticed:**

- ❖ Clothing or jewellery feeling tighter.
- ❖ Feelings of heaviness, fullness, tightness in the affected arm/breast.
- ❖ Aching or stiffness.
- ❖ Swelling that comes and goes.

#### Early detection by bioimpedance

Bioimpedance is a method of measuring the volume of lymph fluid in the affected arm. A bioimpedance machine may detect lymphoedema before any signs are evident.

This simple, painless procedure can be used for early detection and for monitoring treatment effectiveness. Ask if this device is available in your clinic.

**"Prompt treatment by a lymphoedema therapist can help reduce the risk of developing chronic lymphoedema and can lessen its severity."**

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### 4 Reduce your risk

There are some things you can do to reduce your risk of developing lymphoedema:


- ❖ Maintain a healthy weight as obesity greatly increases your lymphoedema risk.
- ❖ Regular exercise and deep breathing help to keep the lymph fluid moving. Try to use your arm as normally as possible.
- ❖ Keep your skin moisturised. Take good care of your nails and avoid nail-biting. Any break in the skin can allow bacteria to enter.
- ❖ Wear gloves when gardening to protect your skin from scratches and cuts.
- ❖ Treat any scratches, grazes or cuts promptly. Clean the area with an antiseptic solution and cover with a non-stick dressing to help prevent an infection. Seek treatment without delay if an infection develops.
- ❖ Avoid extremes of temperature e.g. hot spa pools
- ❖ Avoid sunburn. Use high SPF sunscreen.
- ❖ Use good quality insect repellent to prevent insect bites.
- ❖ Avoid shaving with a blade razor and waxing. Use an electric razor or depilatory creams instead.
- ❖ As a precaution use your unaffected arm when possible for injections, blood tests, IV lines, repeated blood pressure readings.
- ❖ Avoid massage except when performed by a lymphoedema therapist.
- ❖ Avoid acupuncture, body piercing and tattoos on the at-risk arm.

### Travel tips

- ❖ Avoid doing heavy work such as vigorous house cleaning before leaving.
- ❖ Pack light. Use a suitcase with wheels and minimise hand luggage.
- ❖ Wear light, loose, non-constricting clothing.
- ❖ Keep active during long flights. Get out and walk at intervals on long car trips.
- ❖ If possible, go for a walk or a swim after a long flight.
- ❖ Ask your doctor if it's advisable to take antibiotics with you when travelling to a country where it may be difficult to access good quality health care.
- ❖ Take care around coral in the tropics and treat cuts and scratches promptly.

Although lymphoedema can't be cured, the swelling may be reduced and managed with the use of fitted compression garments, massage and, in some cases, complex physical therapy involving skin care, exercise, massage, medical taping and multi-layer bandaging. Newer techniques such as low level laser therapy, pneumatic pumps and in very advanced cases, surgery, may be considered.

Early diagnosis and treatment is vital to reduce the severity of lymphoedema.



**Go for a walk and do some deep breathing during transit stops and also on arrival at your destination.**

### FIND OUT MORE!

Talk to your breastcare nurse or doctor. You can be referred to a lymphoedema therapist at a public hospital or you may choose a private therapist. For a list of therapists in New Zealand go to [www.lymphoedemanz.org.nz](http://www.lymphoedemanz.org.nz)  
Lymphoedema Support Network [www.lymphoedema.org.nz](http://www.lymphoedema.org.nz)



**Our mission is to prevent  
New Zealanders from developing  
and dying of breast cancer.**

The New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation is a charitable trust formed in 1994 to educate all New Zealanders on the life-saving benefits of early detection and the importance of screening mammograms.

Its focus includes:

- ❖ New Zealand-wide breast awareness and education programmes for the public and health professionals.
- ❖ Funding breast cancer research, including breast cancer patient registers, which record detailed information about diagnosis, treatment and outcomes.
- ❖ Providing scholarships and grants for radiation therapy students and breastcare nurses.
- ❖ Supporting programmes which improve the quality of life of New Zealanders with breast cancer. These include:  
Exercise and rehabilitation programmes, a counselling service, dragon-boating teams and support for women living with secondary breast cancer.  
More information on these programmes is provided on our website [www.nzbcf.org.nz/SUPPORT/CancerRehab](http://www.nzbcf.org.nz/SUPPORT/CancerRehab) or phone 0800 BC NURSE.
- ❖ Advocating for improved breast cancer care and treatment for all New Zealanders.



**Can we help you further?**

0800 BCNurse

Visit the New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation's website  
[www.nzbcf.org.nz](http://www.nzbcf.org.nz)

Email your questions to [breasthealth@nzbcf.org.nz](mailto:breasthealth@nzbcf.org.nz) or  
[breastnurse@nzbcf.org.nz](mailto:breastnurse@nzbcf.org.nz)

Phone our breast cancer advice line **0800 BCNurse (0800 2268 773)**

Phone one of our National Educators **0800 902 732**

Phone the Cancer Society **0800 226 237**

Revised April 2015, Leaflet #5